Abolish Work

An Exposition of
Philosophical Ergophobia

Edited by
Nick Ford

Abolish Work
A Lazy Exposition of
Philosophical Ergophobia

Culled from the Writings of
Nick Ford and Other Slackers

*We have done this because
we love liberty and hate authority*
                    Voltairine de Cleyre

Dedicated to the Undedicated

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ABOLISH
WORK

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Foreword

David S. D'Amato (2016)

*To desecrate the temples of work
is the goal of this collection.*

To be clear, the case against work is not one for a shorter
workday, for better jobs, working conditions, or benefits,
but rather for the enthusiastic retrieval of a kind of
autonomy and energy that remains unthinkable as long
as work endures. Violently and imperiously, work steals
our opportunities for self-creation; it forecloses any possi-
bility of Émile Armand's beautiful idea—"personal life as
a work of art," whereby life is lived in favor of oneself,
not as a funereal exercise in abstention. Humiliation and
self-denial are at the center of the agglomeration of
activities we call work; the thing can scarcely be imag-
ined without at least implied reference to these. So
complete is our tacit acceptance of this fact that once
these qualities are severed from a given activity, we accept
that it can no longer properly be called work.

All the time we hear people make statements like,
"Well, I really love what I do, so I can't really even call it
work." This is either the truth, which damns work, or else
it represents the full obliteration of the individual as a
Unique One, a kind of Stockholm Syndrome in which
pathetic, traumatized individuals adulate their corporate
hellholes and masters. It is, of course, much more often
the latter. For the conniving sycophants of the political
sphere, the work question is no question at all; work is

not only inevitable but desirable, not only desirable but
holy. And among those afflicted with the political delusion,
whether purportedly worried about coercion against the
individual or social and economic justice, the salutary
effects of more work—morally, psychologically, physically,
etc.—are much touted. How little awareness they show of
their shared religion, buried under the slogans of duty
and self-denial, of twenty-first century slavery.

That few address work with any searching scrutiny
should not surprise us. Contemplation of this kind
would require a mind quieted by leisure, allowed to think
uninterrupted, not barraged with the jarring imperti-
nence of work. As Friedrich Nietzsche noted so percipi-
ently in *The Gay Science*, we are deeply "ashamed of
keeping still; long reflection almost gives people a bad
conscience." Afraid of what they might see should they
open their eyes, work's prey cower and keep up the
pretense of choice. Earnest employees itch to broadcast
their schedules, each one more brimful than the last,
proud, affected signals of just how *busy* they are. Ni-
etzsche identified this manic cult of busyness and the fear
of missing out over one hundred and thirty years ago.

Premised on what David Graeber accurately calls "a
hyper-fetishism of paperwork," the bowels of our hellish
corporate economy are simply bureaucracy for bureau-
cracy's sake, a moribund world of anxiety and alienation.
Quite contrary to the supercilious assurances of capitalist
apologetics, work is decidedly not finely tuned for
maximum productivity and efficiency; it is a mechanism
of control, as concerned with maintaining existing class
stratifications and categories as it is with producing

iPhones and Nikes. Were efficiency (whatever indeed that is) its goal, work would *at least* appear very different from the bloated, wasteful monstrosity of the existing corporate economy, so dependent on the very kinds of compulsion that advocates of "free trade" purport to hate.

Thus is work necessarily predicated on a disorienting and Orwellian denial of reality.

Wasting away in our etiolated worlds of cubicles, fluorescent lighting, and power strips, we learn a new language—corporatese—a Newspeak that teaches us to deny everything we know and feel, that is, to believe that we are happy, free, and making a valuable contribution. What is "professionalism" but the insistence that we hide ourselves, that we conceal the resentment we feel toward our enslavement and its upholders?

As egoists, though, we cannot really damn these esurient pigs that we call managers, supervisors, and executives, can never fully begrudge their enjoyment of the spoils in this war called society. As S.E. Parker noted, "It is as natural for a wage-earner to defend his interest as it is for a wage-payer to defend his. This is the fact of the matter and only a fool would deny it." Tak Kak remarked similarly that those who now rule the world, and who always have, are the true self-conscious egoists. In a characteristically penetrative insight, Parker observed that the *fact* of class struggle is one thing and the *theory* of it is another, a mere impotent religion, its tedious, lackluster rituals hardening into another idol. We are not fools, and we have no time for contorted theories that would make claims on our lives just as do the ideologies that buttress work, government, and all other tyrannies.

The dogmatic, workerist main current of anarchism, hopelessly tied to an outmoded, dying language, amounts to a worship of work that would leave its institutions intact. Insofar as the workers own and control the factory, the factory itself is glorious, a hallowed place to which we return devotedly and eagerly each morning. But we know—and have known for some time—that this can't be right, that work is inherently oppressive. In point of fact, work may be the encounter with crushing, dehumanizing power that we know best of all. Work, the reality of corporate feudalism, is immediate and tangible rather than remote and abstract, its daily impositions alienating us from ourselves and humanity in the most obvious ways.

For most of us in the twentieth century, it is work—not government, not the church, not family—that is the most direct day-to-day attack on our freedom. The most basic, uncontroversial facts of human biology and the evolutionary road it followed reveal the profound unnaturalness of work. Mindless drones alternately bored to tears and easily diverted, we drift from one glowing rectangle to another, detached from the self-determination long ago extinguished by a school system that abominates creativity and imagination.

But work, that lifelong nightmare from which we can never awake, is also changing us in ways more immediate, corrupting even our genetic material. Constant disruption of our circadian rhythms—first due to compulsory schooling, our preparation for work, then because of corporate drudgery—actually alters the functioning of our DNA. Dependent on natural and complete sleep cycles, genes that govern metabolism, immunity, and stress

responses begin to change when we are deprived of that sleep. Work is quite literally killing us, particularly those with less education and money and those who belong to minority groups. Beyond rendering us prone to depression and anxiety, work and its consequences are increasing incidences of medical conditions such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, stroke, and cancer.

These physical tolls are apparent even if not on the level of consciousness, for it is difficult to describe the exquisite relief of leaving work in terms other than those provided by the carnal pursuits. Indeed, for most of us, trapped in the bleak halls of corporate prison, clocking out for the day is actually much more than orgasmic; it is a restorative re-exposure to freedom, even if only a small measure of it, a reminder that even work's ceaseless attacks on mind and body have not succeeded entirely in extinguishing the vital, inner anarchism of, in Renzo Novatore's words, "individual, violent, reckless, poetic, decentering audacity."

The attacks on work contained herein will, one hopes, reanimate the individualistic ferocity that ought to be the focal point of the anarchist project; at least, they will be needed sustenance for those who have waited so long for the right moment to strike back at work, a moment that may never come.

Here, then, we recall the words of Max Stirner.

The fetters of reality cut the sharpest welts in my flesh every moment. But my own I remain. Given up as serf to a master, I think only of myself and my advantage; his blows strike me indeed, I am not free from them; but I endure them only for my benefit, perhaps in order to

deceive him and make him secure by the semblance of patience, or, again, not to draw worse upon myself by obstinate resistance. But, as I keep my eye on myself and my selfishness, I take by the forelock the first good opportunity to trample the slaveholder into dust. That I then become free from him and his whip is only the consequence of my antecedent egoism.

David S. D'Amato
Chicago, Illinois
March 2016

Introduction:
Towards an Anti-Work World
Nick Ford (2016)

It's true hard work never killed anybody, but I figure, why take the chance?   Ronald Reagan

Er-go-pho-bi-a—n. an abnormal fear of work; an aversion to work

What would a world look like without work? How do we define what work means today? How is work affected by things like culture, the state, and capitalism?

This collection of essays aims to answer some of these questions and many others. This collection of essays also gives insight on how present markets and governments can distort our abilities to meaningfully engage with how we want to live our lives.

Similarly, I have had this collection largely culled from my website AbolishWork.com, which has existed for around three years. I am happy to say that many of the writings are not on my website at all.

Though I do not believe in copyright, I believe in respecting other authors and their labor. Almost all the people I approached agreed to be included here. The logo on the cover was developed by my friend Abe, who has been assisting me with merchandise and the brand of Abolish Work for a while.

I separated this collection into various sections that I hope will make a more manageable and exciting reader

experience. Allowing a plethora of ways to read and re-read this collection is something I took very seriously during the editing of this book. I hope that there will be something for everyone no matter what level of anti-work philosophy you find yourself in.

The foreword you read by my friend David S. D'Amato is significant not only because of its great merit in writing terms, but David's personal merit. David was the individual who first offered the domain name of AbolishWork.com back in late 2013 which naturally took me months of procrastination, slacking, and digital clumsiness to put online.

I write largely by myself and for myself though I don't claim to be an egoist or to completely understand the philosophy. But I certainly sympathize with its adherents and find them fascinating and inspiring at times, if nothing else.

In that vein, to quote Tucker in the first issue of *Liberty*,

> *It may be well to state at the outset that this journal will be edited to suit its editor, not its readers. He hopes that what suits him will suit them; but, if not, it will make no difference.*

Anti-Work 101
Preface
Nick Ford

There seemed no more appropriate way to introduce this collection then by having an entire section dedicated to the basic theory of anti-work itself. Of course, D'Amato gave us plenty to consider with regards to anti-work theory and egoism. But what defines *work* and what gives anti-work advocates their drive to do away with it? This section is dedicated to explaining that.

We start off with *Should We Abolish Work?,* a rather rigorous and academic look at how the author views anti-work. Danaher is an avid blogger, philosopher, and anti-work advocate who situates his advocacy within the framework of academia but manages to still be highly readable. I am excited to include him in this collection.

Does Work Really Work? is a searing look at work as it stands from an anarcho-communist perspective. Brown drives her way into the heart of work by rightly calling out capitalism and the wage labor system we are forced into and under. Her prose in this piece tears at the unequal contracts under capitalism at almost every turn.

Eight Hours Too Many is by E. Kerr, which (as I found out) is a pseudonym used for a variety of individuals. So, no biographical information to provide but I commend the author(s) of this piece. It uses the usual starting point of "eight hours working, eight hour sleeping, and eight hours to ourselves!" and takes it from

a rallying cry for liberals to a cry of defeat for radicals. E. Kerr asks us to do better.

The Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs doesn't need much introduction, but briefly, this piece considers how much of the work we do in today's society is actually useless. Graeber concludes that much of the routine-oriented work we do is "bullshit" and we'd probably be better off without it. Graeber's piece is a great way to introduce yourself to how an anti-work perspective might look on a more systematic basis.

Antiwork–A Radical Shift in How We View Jobs gives a fairly digestible look at what anti-work theory is all about. Dean counters the common narrative that treats work as some sort of *inherent* virtue and instead urges us to consider leisure and to follow our bliss.

Kevin Carson was kind enough to contribute an introductory piece entitled *From the Realm of Necessity to the Realm of Freedom* for this collection. Carson is a member of the Center for a Stateless Society and an author of various works on mutualist anarchism. This piece is focused on describing the abolition of work itself, what our goals might look like and tools anti-work advocates can use for present day purposes.

Divesting from the System: Spotlight on Jobs is a response to an email MayMay received from someone questioning how they could live a life less tied down to capitalism. MayMay offers more food for thought on issues of capitalistic money and how to treat these things as damage to be navigated around.

Should We Abolish Work?

John Danaher (2014)

I seem to work a lot. At least, I think I work a lot.

Like many in the modern world, I find it pretty hard to tell the difference between work and the rest of my life. Apart from when I'm sleeping, I'm usually reading, writing, or thinking (or doing some combination of the three). And since that is essentially what I get paid to do, it is difficult to distinguish between work and leisure. Of course, reading, writing, and thinking are features of many jobs. The difference is that, as an academic, I have the luxury of deciding what I should be reading, writing, and thinking about. This luxury has, perhaps, given me an overly positive view of work. But I confess, there are times when I find parts of my job frustrating and overbearing.

The thing is: maybe that's the attitude we should all have towards work? Maybe work is something we should be trying to abolish?

That, at any rate, is the issue I want to consider in this post. In doing so, I'm driven by one of my current research projects. For the past few months, I've been looking into the issue of technological unemployment and the possible implications it might have for human society. If you've been reading the blog on a regular basis, you will have seen this crop up a number of times.

As I noted in one of my earlier posts, there are two general questions one can ask about technological unemployment:

The Factual Question: Will advances in technology actually lead to technological unemployment?
The Value Question: Would long-term technological unemployment be a bad thing (for us as individuals, for society, etc.)?

It's the value question that I'm interested in here. Suppose we could replace the vast majority of the human workforce with robots or their equivalents? Would this be a good thing? If we ignore possible effects on income distribution—admittedly a big omission but let's do it for the sake of this post—then maybe it would be. That would seem to be the implication of the abolish work arguments I outline below.

Those arguments are inspired by a range of sources, mainly left-wing anti-capitalist writers (e.g. David Graeber, Bob Black, Kathi Weeks and, classically, Bertrand Russell), but do not purport to accurately reflect or represent the views of any. They are just my attempt to simplify a diverse set of arguments. I do so by dividing them into two main types: (i) "Work is bad" arguments; and (ii) Opportunity Cost arguments. I'll discuss both below, along with various criticisms.

What is work anyway?

If we are going to be abolishing work, it would be helpful if we had some idea of what it is we are abolishing. After all, as I just noted, it can sometimes be hard to tell the difference between work and other parts of your life. In crafting a definition we need to guard against the sins of over- and under-inclusiveness, and against the risk of a value-laden definition.

An under-inclusive definition excludes things that really should count as work; an over-inclusive definition risks turning work into a meaningless category; and a value-laden definition simply begs the question.

For example, if we define work as everything we do that is unpleasant, then we are being under-inclusive (since many people don't find all aspects of their work unpleasant) and begging the question (since if we assume work is unpleasant we naturally imply that is the kind of thing we ought to abolish).

Consider Bertrand Russell's famous, and oft-quoted, definition of work:

> *Work is of two kinds: first, altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface relatively to other such matter; second, telling other people to do so. The first kind is unpleasant and ill paid; the second is pleasant and highly paid. The second kind is capable of indefinite extension: there are not only those who give orders, but those who give advice as to what orders should be given.*
>
> Russell, *In Praise of Idleness*

This is pithy, clever, and no doubt captures something of the truth. It certainly corresponds to the definition I first learned in my school physics textbook, and it also conjures up the arresting image of the hardworking labourer and the pampered, overpaid manager.

Nevertheless, it is over-inclusive and value-laden. If we were take Russell seriously, then every time I lifted my teacup to my lips, I would be "working" and I would be doing something "unpleasant". But, of course, neither of these things seems right.

How might we go about avoiding the sins to which

I just alluded? I suggest we adopt the following definition of work: *the performance of some skill (cognitive, emotional, physical etc.) in return for economic reward, or in the ultimate hope of receiving some such reward.*

This definition is quite broad. It covers a range of potential activities: from the hard labour of the farm worker, to the pencil-pushing of the accountant and everything in between. It also covers a wide range of potential rewards: from traditional wages and salaries to any other benefit which can be commodified and exchanged on a market. It also, explicitly, includes what is sometimes referred to as "unpaid employment."

Thus, for example, unpaid internships or apprenticeships are included within my definition because, although they are not done in return for economic reward, they are done in the hope of ultimately receiving some such reward.

Despite this broadness, I think the definition avoids being overly-inclusive because it links the performance of the skill to the receipt of some sort of economic reward. Thus, it avoids classifying everything we do as work. In this respect, it does seem to capture the core phenomenon of interest in the anti-work literature.

Furthermore, the definition doesn't beg the question by simply assuming that work is, by definition, "bad." The definition is completely silent on this issue. That said, definitions are undoubtedly tricky, and philosophers love to pull them apart. I have no doubt my proposed definition has some flaws that I can't see myself right now (we are often blind to the flaws in our own position). I'll be happy to hear about them from commenters.

6

"Work is Bad" Arguments

If we can accept my proposed definition of work, we can proceed to the arguments themselves. The first class of arguments proposes that we ought to abolish work because work is "bad". In other words, the arguments in this class fit the following template:

1 *If something is bad, we ought to abolish it.*
2 *Work is bad.*
3 *Therefore, we ought to abolish work.*

Premise 1 is dubious in its current form. Just because something is bad does not mean we should abolish it. If it we can reform or ameliorate its badness, then we might be able to avoid complete abolition. This might even make sense if the thing in question has good qualities in addition to the bad ones. We wouldn't want to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater.

It is only really if something is intrinsically and overwhelmingly bad that it ought to be abolished. For in that case, its good qualities will be minimal and its bad qualities will be ineradicable without complete abolition.

This suggests the following revision to premise 1 and the remainder of the argument:

1★ *If something is intrinsically and overwhelmingly bad, we ought to abolish it.*
2★ *Work is intrinsically and overwhelmingly bad.*
3 *Therefore, we ought to abolish work.*

This raises the bar considerably for proponents of abolition, but it seems to chime pretty well with many of the traditional critiques. For instance, Bob Black issues the following indictment of work:

Work is the source of nearly all the misery in the world.

Almost any evil you'd care to name comes from working or from living in a world designed for work. In order to stop suffering, we have to stop working.

Black, *The Abolition of Work*

And Bertrand Russell chimes in:

I want to say, in all seriousness, that a great deal of harm is being done in the modern world by belief in the virtuousness of work, and that the road to happiness and prosperity lies in an organized diminution of work.

Russell, *In Praise of Idleness*

More recently, Kathi Weeks argued that there is something mysterious about our willingness to do something so unpleasant:

Why do we work so long and so hard? The mystery here is not that we are expected to work or that we devote so much time and energy to its pursuit, but rather that there is not more active resistance to this state of affairs. The problems with work today…have to do with both its quantity and its quality and are not limited to the travails of any one group. Those problems include the low wages in so many sectors of the economy; the unemployment, underemployment, and precarious employment suffered by many workers; and the overwork that often characterizes even the most privileged forms of employment; after all, even the best job is a problem when it monopolizes so much of life.

Weeks, *The Problem with Work*

To be sure, not all of these authors claim that work ought to be abolished. Some merely call for a reduction or diminution. Nevertheless, they seem agreed that there is something pretty bad about work. What could that be?

There are many candidate accounts of work's badness. Some focus on how work compromises autonomy and freedom. The classic Marxist critique would hold that work is bad because it involves a form of alienation and subordination: workers are alienated from the true value of their labour and subordinated to the will of another. There is also the complaint that work is a form of coercion or duress: because we need access to economic rewards to survive and thrive, we are effectively forced into work. We are, to put it bluntly, "wage slaves."

Finally, there is Levine's worry that the necessity of work compromises a particular conception of the good life: the life of leisure and gratuitous pursuit.

Moving beyond the effects of work on autonomy and freedom, there are other accounts of work's badness. There are those that argue that work is stultifying and boring: it forces people into routines and limits their creativity and personal development. It is often humiliating, degrading and tiring: think of cleaning shift workers, forced to work long hours cleaning up other people's dirt. This cannot be a consistently rewarding experience. In addition to this, some people cite the effect that work has on health and well-being, as well as its colonising potential. As Weeks points out, one of the remarkable features of modern work is how its seems to completely dominate our lives. This certainly seems to be true of my working life, as I suggested in the intro.

This is far from an exhaustive list of reasons why work is bad, but already we can see some problems with the argument.

I'll mention two here.

The first, and most obvious, is that these accounts of work's badness seem to be insufficiently general. At best, they might apply to specific workers and specific forms of work. Thus, for example, it is not true that all workers are coerced into work. Some people are independently wealthy and have no need for the economic rewards that work brings, and some countries have sufficiently generous welfare provisions to take work out of the "coercion" bracket (as noted previously, the basic income guarantee could be game-changer in this regard).

Similarly, while it is true that some forms of work are humiliating, stultifying, degrading, tiring, and deleterious to one's health and well being, this isn't true of all forms of work. That's not to say we should do nothing about the forms of work that share these negative qualities; but it is to say that the complete abolition or diminution of work goes too far. We should just focus on the bad forms of work (which, of course, requires a revised argument).

A second problem with the argument is that it seems to fly in the face of what many people think about their work. Many people actually seem to enjoy work, and actively seek it out. They attach a huge amount of self-worth and self-belief to success in their working lives. From their perspective, work doesn't seem all that bad. How does the argument account for them?

There is a pretty standard reply.

People who derive such pleasure and self-worth from work are victims of a kind of false-consciousness. The virtuousness of the work ethic is an ideology that has been foisted upon them from youth. Consequently,

they've been trained to associate hard work with all manner of positive traits, and unemployment with negative ones. But there is nothing essential to these associations. Work is only contingently associated with positive traits. For example, it is only because society places such value in the work ethic that our sense of self-worth and confidence gets wrapped up in it. We could easily break down these learned associations.

Is this response persuasive? It's a tricky philosophical issue. I think there is some truth to the false-consciousness line. There are at least some strictly contingent relationships between work and positive outcomes. A restructuring or reordering of societal values could dissolve those relationships.

For example, during the wave of unemployment that followed the 2008 financial crisis, it certainly seemed to me like unemployment carried less of a social stigma. Many of my friends lost their jobs or found it difficult to get work, but no one thought less of them as a result. Nevertheless, I can't completely discount the pleasure or enjoyment that people claim to get from work. The question is whether this could be disassociated from the pursuit of economic reward, and whether greater pleasures could be found elsewhere. That's what the next argument contends.

Opportunity Cost Arguments
Opportunity cost arguments are simple. They argue that work ought to be abolished because there are better uses of our time. In other words, they do not claim that work is overwhelmingly and necessarily bad, but simply claim it is a worse alternative. The arguments fit the following template:

4 *If engaging engaging in activity X prevents us from engaging
   in a more valuable activity, then X ought to be abolished.*
5 *Working prevents us from engaging in more valuable activities.*
6 *Therefore, work ought to be abolished.*

Let's go through the premises of this one.

Premise 4 may, once again, go too far in arguing
that an activity that denies us access to another must be
abolished. It may be possible to reform or revise the
activity so that it doesn't prevent us from engaging in the
other activity.

So, for example, shortening the working week
dramatically might reduce the obstacle work poses to
engaging in other activities. This may be why the likes of
Bertrand Russell and Kathi Weeks argue for such reduc-
tions (to four hours and thirty hours, respectively).

Another problem with premise 1 is that it ignores
the possible need for the less desirable activity. Cleaning
my kitchen certainly prevents me from engaging in other
more desirable activities, but it is probably necessary if I
wish to avoid creating a health hazard. This is something
many people argue in relation to work: it may be un-
pleasant but it is necessary. Without it we wouldn't
generate the wealth needed to bring us longer lives, better
education, improved healthcare and so on.

That suggests the following revision is in order:

4★ *If engaging in activity X prevents us from engaging in a
   more valuable activity, and if X is not necessary for some
   greater good, then X ought to be abolished.*
5★ *Working prevents us from engaging in more valuable
   activities, and it is not necessary for some greater good.*
6 *Therefore, work ought to be abolished.*

This revision makes it harder to defend premise 5★, but let's see what can be said on its behalf. In his effort to praise idleness, Russell makes the point that leisure and idleness are better use of our time. To back this up he points out that the leisure classes have historically been responsible for the creation of civilization.

They did so at the expense of others, to be sure, but that doesn't defeat the point:

> In the past, there was a small leisure class and a larger working class. The leisure class enjoyed advantages for which there was no basis in social justice; this necessarily made it oppressive…but in spite of this drawback it contributed nearly the whole of what we call civilization. It cultivated the arts and discovered the sciences; it wrote the books, invented the philosophies and refined social relations.
>
> Russell, *In Praise of Idleness*

Bob Black, likewise, points out that work denies us access to a more valuable activity, play:

> [Abolishing work] does mean creating a new way of life based on play; in other words, a ludic revolution. By "play" I mean also festivity, creativity, conviviality, commensality, and maybe even art. There is more to play than child's play, as worthy as that is. I call for a collective adventure in generalized joy and freely interdependent exuberance…The ludic life is totally incompatible with existing reality.
>
> Black, *The Abolition of Work*

The suggestion from both authors is that non-work is better, all things considered, than work. Russell bases this on an *instrumentalist* argument: we get more things of value from non-work (arts, sciences, political organisation

etc.). Black bases it on an *intrinsic* argument: the playful life is, in and of itself, better than the working life. I think there is something to be said for both arguments. Although work undoubtedly has benefits and can be intrinsically rewarding to some, there is reason to think a life of non-work would be better than a life of work.

Why? Well, one obvious problem with work is that one's skills and talents are directed at providing things that are of value on an economic market.

And there is reason think that markets won't always value things that are best for society or best for the individuals who work to satisfy the market demands. ·David Graeber puts it rather bluntly:

> [I]f 1% of the population controls most of the disposable wealth, what we call "the market" reflects what they think is useful or important, not anybody else.
>
> Graeber, *On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs*

Indeed, freedom from market pressures is one of the great luxuries of my own line of work. I am able—for now anyway—to pursue the research that I find interesting and rewarding. It may not always be this way. Many of my academic colleagues are forced to produce research that has economic benefits or impacts. But I think that is genuinely inferior to being able to captain one's own ship. In addition to this, I like the opportunity cost argument because it doesn't force one to make unrealistic claims about the badness of all forms of work. It just says that whatever the benefits of work, non-work is slightly better.

Still, there are criticisms to be made of the argument. I'll discuss three here.

The first one is the "necessity" objection. This links

into the revised form of the argument. A critic might concede that non-work is better, all things considered, than work, but argue that work is, unfortunately, necessary for some greater good.

After all, we need those tax dollars to support education, healthcare, and the self-directed research interests of academics. People wouldn't produce food or houses or other basic necessities without financial reward, would they? This is a fair point, but it is worth noting that far fewer people are employed meeting basic human needs now than there were a hundred years ago. Why? Technology has allowed us to automate most agricultural and manufacturing jobs. Machines can now be used to meet our basic needs. Maybe machines could take over all the other socially valuable aspects of economic activity, and free us up to live the ludic life? One can always dream.

The second objection might be termed the idleness objection. Proponents of this will say that the opportunity cost argument presumes a far too rosy picture of human motivation. It presumes that if left to their own devices, people will pursue projects of great worth to both themselves and others. But this is mere fantasy.

If freed from the discipling (invisible) hand of the market, people will simply fall idle and succumb to vice. We know this to be true because people suffer from weakness of the will: it is only the necessity of meeting their economic needs that allows them to overcome this weakness. I find this objection unpersuasive. One reason for this is that it is difficult to determine what is so bad about so-called vice and idleness.

But suppose we could determine this. In that case, I

have no doubt that in the absence of work many will succumb to vice, but I'm pretty sure they do that in presence of work anyway. It's not clear to me that things will be any worse in a world without work. People have basic psychological needs—e.g. for autonomy, competence and relatedness—that will drive them to do things in the absence of economic reward. Ironically, the major driver of vice and idleness might be advances in automation and artificial intelligence.

If AIs don't just take over the world of work, but also the world of moral projects (e.g. the alleviation of suffering), scientific discovery and artistic creation, then there might be nothing left for us humans to do. I suspect we are a long way from that reality, but it is something to consider nonetheless.

The final objection is the "efficiency" objection.

The idea here is that even though the market does force us to cater to specific kinds of demands, it does have the virtue of forcing us to do things in an efficient manner. We all know the historical mistakes of communism and socialism: central planning and state-directed projects bred (and continued to breed) bloated and inefficient bureaucracies. Wouldn't a world without work lead us to commit the same mistakes? I'm not sure about this. I agree that markets can be efficient (though sometimes they aren't) but, as pointed out above, it's not clear that humans need to be the ones working to meet market demands. Also, in calling for an abolition or diminution of work, it does not follow that one is calling for the re-installation of centrally planned governments.

Conclusion

So what's the takeaway? Should work be abolished or, at the very least, diminished?

It's too difficult to answer that question in a blog post—or maybe in any venue—but we can reach some general conclusions. First, it's probably wrong to say that all forms of work are sufficiently bad to warrant its abolition. At best, we can say that certain types of work are bad, and their badness is of sufficient magnitude to warrant abolition. That argument needs to be developed at a much more job-specific level.

Second, if we are to make the case for the abolition of work, it's probably best to do so based on the opportunity cost argument. The advantage of that argument is that it doesn't commit us to proving that work is irredeemably awful; it just commits us to proving that the alternatives are better. And I think there is some reason to think that freedom from the demands of economic markets would be better for many people. To make the case fully persuasive, however, we would need to show that work is not necessary for greater goods. This is something that technological unemployment may actually help to prove: it we can use technology to meet our basic needs, the necessity of work may slowly erode.

None of this addresses the white elephant in the room: the effects of technological unemployment on wealth and income inequality. A life without work is no good if the economic rewards it brings are necessary to our survival and flourishing. It is only by reorganising the system of wealth distribution that this can be overcome. Whether that is desirable or feasible is a topic for another day.

Does Work Really Work?

L. Susan Brown (2011)

One of the first questions people often ask when they are introduced to one another in our society is "what do you do?" This is more than just polite small talk—it is an indication of the immense importance work has for us. Work gives us a place in the world, it is our identity, it defines us, and, ultimately, it confines us. Witness the psychic dislocation when we lose our jobs, when we are fired, laid off, forced to retire, or when We fail to get the job we applied for in the first place.

An unemployed person is defined not in positive but in negative terms: to be unemployed is to lack work. To lack work is to be socially and economically marginalized, To answer "nothing" to the question "what do you do?" is emotionally difficult and socially unacceptable. Most unemployed people would rather answer such a question with vague replies like "I'm between contracts" or "I have a few resumes out and the prospects look promising" than admit outright that they do not work.

For to not work in our society is to lack social significance—it is to be a nothing, because nothing is what you do.

Those who *do* work (and they are becoming less numerous as our economies slowly disintegrate) are something—they are teachers, nurses, doctors, factory workers, machinists, dental assistants, coaches, librarians, secretaries, bus drivers and so on. They have identities defined by what they do. They are considered normal

productive members of our society.

Legally their work is considered to be subject to an employment contract, which if not explicitly laid out at the beginning of employment is implicitly understood to be part of the relationship between employee and employer. The employment contract is based on the idea that it is possible for a fair exchange to occur between an employee who trades her/his skills and labour for wages supplied by the employer. Such an idea presupposes that a person's skills and labour are not inseparable from them, but are rather separate attributes that can be treated like property to be bought and sold. The employment contract assumes that a machinist or an exotic dancer, for instance, have the capacity to separate out from themselves the particular elements that are required by the employer and are then able to enter into an agreement with the employer to exchange only those attributes for money.

The machinist is able to sell technical skills while the exotic dancer is able to sell sexual appeal, and, according to the employment contract, they both do so without selling themselves as people. Political scientists and economists refer to such attributes as "property in the person," and speak about a person's ability to contract out labour power in the form of property in the person.

In our society, then, work is defined as the act by which an employee contracts out her or his labour power as property in the person to an employer for fair monetary compensation. This way of describing work, of understanding it as a fair exchange between two equals, hides the real relationship between employer and employ-

ee: that of domination and subordination.

For if the truth behind the employment contract were widely known, workers in our society would refuse to work, because they would see that it is impossible for human individuals to truly separate out labour power from themselves. "property in the person" doesn't really exist as something that an individual can simply sell as a separate thing.

Machinists cannot just detach from themselves the specific skills needed by an employer; those skills are part of an organic whole that cannot be disengaged from the entire person, similarly, sex appeal is an intrinsic part of exotic dancers, and it is incomprehensible how such a constitutive, intangible characteristic could be severed from the dancers themselves.

A dancer has to be totally pre sent in order to dance, just like a machinist must be totally present in order to work; neither can just send their discrete skills to do the work for them. Whether machinist, dancer, teacher, secretary, or pharmacist, it is not only one's skills that are being sold to an employer, it is also one's very being.

When employees contract out their labour power as property in the person to employers, what is really happening is that employees are selling their own self determination, their own wills, their own freedom. In short, they are, during their hours of employment, slaves.

What is a slave? A slave is commonly regarded as a person who is the legal property of another and is bound to absolute obedience. The legal lie that is created when we speak of a worker's capacity to sell property in the person without alienating her or his will allows us to

maintain the false distinction between a worker and a slave. A worker must work according to the will of another. A worker must obey the boss, or ultimately lose the job. The control the employer has over the employee at work is absolute, There is in the end no negotiation—you do it the boss' way or you hit the highway.

It is ludicrous to believe that it is possible to separate out and sell "property in the person" while maintaining human integrity. To sell one's labour power on the market is to enter into a relationship of subordination with one's employer—it is to become a slave to the employer/master. The only major differences between a slave and a worker is that a worker is only a slave at work while a slave is a slave twenty-four hours a day, and slaves know that they are slaves, while most workers do not think of themselves in such terms.

Carole Pateman points out the implications of the employment contract in her book *The Sexual Contract*:

> *Capacities or labour power cannot be used without the worker using his will, his understanding and experience, to put them into effect. The use of labour power requires the presence of its "owner," and it remains as mere potential until he acts in the manner necessary to put it into use, or agrees or is compelled so to act; that is, the worker must labour. To contract for the use of labour power is a waste of resources unless it can be used in the way in which the new owner requires. The fiction "labour power" cannot be used; what is required is that the worker labours as demanded. The employment contract must, therefore, create a relationship of command and obedience between employer and worker.... In short, the contract in which the worker*

allegedly sells his labour power is a contract in which, since he cannot be separated from his capacities, he sells command over the use of his body and himself. To obtain the right to the use of another is to be a (civil) master. [1]

Terms like "master" and "slave" are not often used when describing the employment contract within capitalist market relations; however, this does not mean that such terms don't apply. By avoiding such terms and instead insisting that the employment contract is fair, equitable and based on the worker's freedom to sell his or her labour power, the system itself appears fair, equitable and free. One problem with misidentifying the true nature of the employee/employer relationship is that workers experience work as slavery at the same time that they buy into it ideologically.

No matter what kind of job a worker does, whether manual or mental, well paid or poorly paid, the nature of the employment contract is that the worker must, in the end, obey the employer. The employer is always right. The worker is told how to work, where to work, when to work, and what to work on. This applies to university professors and machinists, to lawyers and carpet cleaners: when you are an employee, you lose your right to self-determination.

This loss of freedom is felt keenly, which is why many workers dream of starting their own businesses, being their own bosses, being self-employed. Most will never realize their dreams, however, and instead are condemned to sell their souls for money. The dream doesn't disappear, however, and the uneasiness, unhappiness, and meaninglessness of their jobs gnaws away at

them even as they defend the system under which they exploitedly toil.

It doesn't have to be this way. There is nothing sacred about the employment contract that protects it from being challenged, that entrenches it eternally as a form of economic organization. We can understand our own unhappiness as workers not as a psychological problem that demands Prozac, but rather as a human response to domination. We can envision a better way of working, and we can do so now, today, in our own lives. By doing so we can chisel away at the wage slavery system; we can undermine it and replace it with freer ways of working.

What would a better way of work look like? It would more resemble what we call play than work. That is not to say that it would be easy, as play can be difficult and challenging, like we often see in the spores we do for fun. It would be self-directed, self-desired, and freely chosen. This means that it would have to be disentangled from the wage system, for as soon as one is paid one becomes subservient to whoever is doing the paying.

As Alexander Berkman noted: "labour and its products must be exchanged without price, without profit, freely according to necessity,"[2]

Work would be done because it was desired, not because it was forced. Sound impossible? Not at all. This kind of work is done now, already, by most of us on a daily basis. It is the sort of activity we choose to do after our eight or ten hours of slaving for someone else in the paid workplace. It is experienced every time we do something worthwhile for no pay, every time we change a diaper,

umpire a kid's baseball game, run a race, give blood, volunteer to sit on a committee, counsel a friend, write a newsletter, bake a meal, or do a favour.

We take part in this underground free economy when we coach, tutor, teach, build, dance, baby-sit, write a poem, or program a computer without getting paid. We must endeavor to enlarge these areas of free work to encompass more and more of our time, while simultaneously trying to change the structures of domination in the paid workplace as much as we possibly can.

Barter, while superficially appearing as a challenge to the wage system, is still bound by the same relationships of domination. To say that I will paint your whole house if you will cook my meals for a month places each of us into a situation of relinquishing our own self-determination for the duration of the exchange. For I must paint your house to your satisfaction and you must make my meals to my satisfaction, thereby destroying for each of us the self-directed, creative spontaneity necessary for the free expression of will: Barter also conjüres up the problem of figuring out how much of my time is worth how much of your time, that is, what the value of our work is, in order that the exchange is fair and equal.

Alexander Berkman posed this problem as the question, "why not give each according to the value of his work?," to which he answers,

> *Because there is no way by which value can be measured… Value is what a thing is worth… What a thing is worth no one can really tell. Political economists generally claim that the value of a commodity is the amount of labour required to produce it, of "socially necessary labour," as Marx says.*

But evidently it is not a just standard of measurement.

Suppose the carpenter worked three hours to make a kitchen chair, while the surgeon took only half an hour to perform an operation that saved your life. If the amount of labour used determines value, then the chair is worth more than your life. Obvious nonsense, of course. Even if you should count in the years of study and practice the surgeon needed to make him capable of performing the operation, how are you going to decide what "an hour of operating" is worth?

The carpenter and mason also had to be trained before they could do their work properly, but you don't figure in those years of apprenticeship when you contract for some work with them. Besides, there is also to be considered the particular ability and aptitude that every worker, writer, artist or physician must exercise in his labours. That is a purely individual personal factor. How are you going toestimate its value?

That is why value cannot be determined. The same thing may be worth a lot to one person while it is worth nothing or very little to another. It may be worth much or little even to the same person, at different times. A diamond, a painting, a book may be worth a great deal to one man and very little to another. A loaf of bread will be worth a great deal to you when you are hungry, and much less when you are not. Therefore the real value of a thing cannot be ascertained if it is an unknown quantity.[3]

In a barter system, for an exchange to be fair, the value of the exchanged goods and services must be equal. However, value is unknowable, therefore barter falls apart on practical grounds.

Increasing the amount of free work in our lives requires that we be conscious of the corrupting effects of money and barter. Thus, baby-sit your friend's children not for money, but because you want to do so. Teach someone how to speak a second language, or edit someone's essay, or coach a running team for the simple pleasure of taking part in the activity itself. Celebrate giving and helping as play, without expecting anything in return.

Do these things because you want to, not because you have to.

This is not to say that we should do away with obligations, but only that such obligations should be self-assumed. We must take on free work in a responsible matter, or else our dream of a better world will degenerate into chaos. Robert Graham outlines the characteristics of self-assumed obligations:

> *Self-assumed obligations are not 'binding' in the same sense that laws or commands are. A law or command is binding in the sense that failure to comply with it will normally attract the application of some sort of coercive sanction by authority promulgating the law or making the command. The binding character of law is not internal to the concept of law itself but dependent on external factors, such as the legitimacy of the authority implementing and enforcing it. A promise, unlike a law, is not enforced by the person making it. The content of the obligation is defined by the person assuming it, not by an external authority.*[4]

To promise, then, is to oblige oneself to see through an activity, but the fulfillment of the obligation is up to the person who made the promise in the first place, and

nonfulfillment carries no external sanction besides, perhaps, disappointment (and the risk that others will avoid interacting with someone who habitually breaks her or his promises).

Free work, therefore, is a combination of voluntary play and self-assumed obligations, of doing what you desire to do and co-operating with others. It is forsaking the almighty dollar for the sheer enjoyment of creation and recreation.

Bob Black lyrically calls for the abolition of work, which

> doesn't mean that we have to stop doing things. It does mean creating a new way of life based on play... By 'play' I mean also festivity, creativity, conviviality, commensuality, and maybe even art. There is more to play than child's play, as worthy as that as. I call for a collective adventure in generalized joy and freely interdependent exuberance.[5]

We must increase the amount of free work in our lives by doing what we want, alone and with others, whether high art or mundane maintenance. We need to tear ourselves away from drinking in strict exchange terms: I will do this for you if you will do that for me.

Even outside our formal work hours, the philosophy of contract and exchange permeates our ways of interacting with others. This is evident when we do a favour for someone—more often than not, people feel uncomfortable unless they can return the favour in some way, give tit for tat. We must resist this sense of having to exchange favours. Instead, we need to be and act in ways that affirm our own desires and inclinations.

This does not mean being lazy or slothful (although

at times we may need to be so), but rather calls for self discipline. Free work actually demands a great deal of self discipline, as there is no external force making us work, but only our own internal desire to partake in an activity that motivates our participation.

While we move towards a freer world by consciously affirming free work outside the marketplace, we can also make a difference during those hours when we are paid to work. Being conscious of the fact that when we are selling our labour we are actually selling ourselves gives us self awareness. Such self awareness is empowering, as the first step to changing one's condition is understanding the true nature of that condition. Through this understanding, we can develop strategies for challenging the slave wage system.

For instance, every time we ignore the boss and do what we want we create a mini-revolution in the workplace. Every time we sneak a moment of pleasure at work we damage the system of wage slavery. Every time we undermine the hierarchical structure of decision making in the workplace we gain a taste of our own self worth.

These challenges can come from below or from above: those of us who achieve a measure of power in the workplace can institute structural changes that empower those below, drawing from principles like consensus decision-making and decentralization.

For instance, as teachers we can introduce students to the idea of consensus by using such a method to make major class room decisions. Those of us who head up committees or task forces can advocate institutional

structures, policies, and constitutions that decentralize power. Of course, the wage system is inherently corrupt and unreformable; however, we can make it more bearable while at the same time trying to destroy it.

And destroy it we must. If one's identity is based on work, and work is based on the employment contract, and the employment contract is a falsehood, then our very identities have at their foundation a lie. In addition, the labour market is moving towards an ever-increasing exploitative form of work: it is predicted that by the year 2000, fifty percent of the labour force will be engaged in temp work—work that is even less self directed than permanent full-time jobs. Bob Black has it right when he proclaims that "no one should ever work."[6]

Who knows what kinds of creative activity would be unleashed if only we were free to do what we desired? What sorts of social organizations would we fashion if we were not stifled day in and day out by drudgery?

For example, what would a woman's day look like if we abolished the wage system and replaced it with free and voluntary activity?

Bob Black argues that "by abolishing wage labor and achieving full unemployment we undermine the sexual division of labor,"[7] which is the linchpin of modern sexism.

What would a world look like that encouraged people to be creative and self directed, that celebrated enjoyment and fulfillment? What would be the consequences of living in a world where, if you met someone new and were asked what you did, you could joyfully reply "this, that, and the other thing" instead of "nothing"?

Such is the world we deserve.

1 Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp. 150–151.
2 Alexander Berkman, *ABC of Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, 1977), p. 20.
3 Berkman, p. 19.
4 Robert Graham, *The Role of Contract in Anarchist Ideology*, in *For Anarchism: History, Theory, and Practice,* edited by David Goodway (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 168.
5 Bob Black, *The Abolition of Work, http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/bob-black-the-abolition-of-work*
6 Black, ibid
7 Black, ibid

Eight Hours Too Many?

E. Kerr (2000)

Work less to live more. What a beautiful slogan!

I wonder if the one who coined it understood the unintended truth it contains, that work is the negation of life.

> *Eight hours of obligation is enough to exhaust a person's energy. What he gives at work is his life, the better part of her strength. Even if the work has not degraded her, even if she has not felt himself overcome by boredom and fatigue, he leaves exhausted, diminished, with the imagination withered.*

So a worker wrote several decades ago. Anyone who has worked even for just one day understands the meaning of these words. This is why the reduction of work hours has always been one of the primary demands of those who don't commission the work, but who carry it out, and so bear its entire burden.

It is taken for granted that less time spent at work means more time dedicated to oneself, and thus that every minute, every hour snatched from the factory or office could only represent a step forward toward a better quality of life. Most likely no one would venture to deny it once someone says it. But we shouldn't ignore the contradictions to be found in such a conviction.

If one wants to work less, it is clearly because one does not love work. But why?

If work gave satisfaction, joy, contentment, why would one ever renounce it? If work was really the dimension through which the human being creates the

world and himself, why does she feel it as a burden? If it is true that work is human nobility, why hope that a stroke of fortune will free us from it forever?

Clearly because work does not exalt the human being at all, but rather degrades her.

Life is the consumption of vital human energy, but through work this squandering of energy occurs at times, in places, in ways and for aims that are not those of the person working. When one works, it is always for someone else. So by detesting imposition, one ends up detesting work. But if we don't love work, if it is a constraint, then why work? Because we can't do anything else; this is the most common response.

And it's true, we can't do anything else. If we don't want to die of hunger, we are forced to earn money, we are forced to go to work. If we want to work, we are forced to learn a trade, whichever one circumstances suggest to us, so that we end up adapting ourselves to whatever befalls us. The people on this planet who can sincerely claim to love work, to feel fulfilled by what they do, are very few.

But beyond this privileged few, we are all forced to do something that we don't want to do, we are forced to do a job that we would gladly avoid if we could. And what compels us is the fear of poverty. It really seems that all the conditions are there so that we can speak of extortion.

So working means submitting to extortion. But then what does a reduction in work hours mean?

To begin with, reducing the hours of work means making a change. Many say a positive change. But there

is a contradiction here as well. Changing a clause in a contract does not mean annulling the contract as such. On the contrary, as everyone knows well, a contract is renegotiated only if one intends to extend it. In other word, to continue to work. "But to work less and less!" someone will say. I don't think so.

Rather I think that work isn't just a loss to all of us, but that there is a hoax involved in all of this as well. The reduction of work hours will not make us work less, but more. In fact, in the great majority of cases, it isn't just the hours that are reduced, but also the earnings. We work less, but we also earn less.

It follows from this that anyone who wants to maintain the acquired standard of living, and perhaps improve it, will be forced to find a second job to round out her wages: to work more, not less. Instead of doing one job for eight hours every day, one will now do two jobs, one for six hours and another for four hours, for example.

I could be wrong of course. Maybe we really will manage to work less for the same wages. Maybe our Masters are really willing to grant this to us. But let's be sincere.

In a world where everything calls for unbridled consumption, in which it is utterly necessary to pay rent or pay back a loan for a house, pay the installment on the car or furniture, the bill for the dentist or plumber—and what about the latest fashion in boots, should we do without them? and the movie that won ten Oscars, should we miss it? and that new restaurant that just opened, shall we see how the food is?—it is easy to predict that no one will be content with a lower wage in exchange for a few

more hours for himself. If we gain more time, we will not use it for ourselves. We will use it to go look for another job that will let us earn more money.

So it doesn't matter whether wages are lowered or remain the same: either way we will go in search of new employment. And the new jobs all have the virtue of *flexibility* loudly invoked by industrialists. These jobs are inferior, poorly paid, with little security. And no one can protest against it. No one is prepared to face trouble for a temporary job to which he is bound for just a short time.

In short, we will not really have more time for ourselves. So what is this time that gets talked about so much? Time is always money. Whether it is the time spent at work, the time spent traveling between home and the workplace, the time necessary for putting oneself in order with the management, the time reserved for professional development, the time passed curing diseases caused by work, the time dedicated to restoring the energy spent on work or the time spent looking for a new job, the thesis does not change: all our time belongs to work, twenty-four hours out of twenty-four.

Besides, in order to dedicate time to ourselves, we would at least have to know who we are, we would have to recognize ourselves, we would have to possess passions that are foreign to work time, that make our hearts pound.

Do we have such passions? Do we really know ourselves? And how would it be possible, considering that we have never had the time for it?

Besides anyone who puts up with being black-mailed must put up with the conditions set by the blackmailer. Blackmail is always based on a relationship

of force and anyone who thinks she can change it to her advantage without having this force is naïve. This is why I think that reduction of work hours could only benefit industrialists and their political friends, in short, the blackmailers. Of course, we know that many of them turn red with rage when they hear talk about the reduction of work hours. Others, the shrewdest, have already sniffed the matter out and declared themselves willing.

It is true that in the past industrialists have always been interested in extending the workday to its extreme limits. The more their subordinates worked, the richer they became. And every increase in productivity comes about through a more constant, methodical, and intense use of productive forces. It's just that after a century, the principle productive force is no longer the human being. It is the machine. Since the industrial revolution, humans serve almost solely to make machines function. And the machines are becoming more and more powerful.

In order to be able to maintain and increase their profits, industrialists are thus compelled to update and modernize their technological equipment. But at the same time as capital changes its work methods, it also transforms human beings, because it changes their relationship to work and to what surrounds them. The advent of information technology is indicative in this sense.

Today a world of work that revolves around workers and factories is unthinkable. Of course, the continuing improvement of machines, so that they can function with less and less attention, makes the human presence almost superfluous. There is no longer a need for a thousand workers to build an airplane; it requires much less skill to handle a computer.

But these wonderful computers are expensive and become quickly outdated, very quickly. Purchase one and another one that is better is already ready, and it is absolutely "necessary." In order to make them render the maximum, they must always be working, without a moment's pause. Otherwise, how would the industrialist pay off the costs he must bear? Thus, the presence of human beings is still necessary. But fewer and fewer are needed, it is true.

This is where the possibility for reducing work time would be effectively concrete.

But if the civilization of machines can free us from the burden of work, why does everyone mourn its loss? Because no one can just stand there twiddling his thumbs. Well then, everyone should work since, aside from providing us with the means of subsistence, work *keeps us occupied*. It controls us. It weakens us. The job is a kind of preventative police.

This is why when one is jobless, it is necessary to invent a job for her. Modern information technologies permit it. And this is how thousands, if not millions, of individuals are prepared to let themselves be nailed down in front of a computer, to work for more than eight hours a day. Because this is the reality of telework: you work to exhaustion.

In case we haven't been clear, technological innovations are prepared by our blackmailers to give us the illusion that they make our lives better. Their aims are not exactly benign; their purpose is not to produce things in half the time it used to take in order to alleviate the fatigue of the individual. On the contrary, the more the

productive processes are sped up, the more possibilities for expanding it further open up. If the old economy seems to have reached its full development, a new one is started. New economy, precisely.

Of course, our blackmailers and their henchmen reject this sort of criticism.

They certainly admit that the development of capitalism has produced some "imbalances," but everything is explained away as excesses overcome by progress, a historical period already closed forever. In support of this thesis, one of their best arguments involves displaying the reduction of the workday.

The fact that the daily hours of work have gone from sixteen to eight, and soon will be even less, should convince us that capitalism is not quite the bloody monster that we continue to depict, but rather is prepared to give a fair payment for services rendered in the years of exertion and fatigue. The "historical reduction" of work time would constitute the materialization of the workers' conquest, the demonstration that the freedom and the reign of necessity can coexist, the proof of a possible progressive and peaceful modification of capitalism.

But with such a pretense, something is left out.

When the English parliament passed the first law limiting the length of the workday (the Factory Act) in 1848, it did so in order to put an end to workers' agitation that threatened civil war. After the legislative reduction of the workday to ten hours—which also allowed the reduction of wages by about 25 per cent—the working class, as its godfather Marx had to say, "was struck by a deprivation of rights and placed under the

law of suspicion."

In France, the reform proclaimed after February 1848 led to the bloody suppression of the June insurrection in Paris. A close connection thus exists between social war and legislative intervention: the latter works essentially to placate the former, or to avert it. In the same way, the laws that limit the workday are enacted when it becomes vital to avoid social disorders that might break out in an increasingly indefensible social order.

When they started to talk about the reduction of work time to eight hours a day at the beginning of the last century, an old anarchist got straight to the point, exclaiming, "Work eight hours a day for a boss?… But that's eight hours too many!"

This anarchist's indignation is the indignation that should be felt in the face of any extortion. It is the very nature of work that is intolerable, not its duration. It is the need to exchange one's aspirations for biological survival. Work is not reduced, but destroyed. Extortion cannot be renegotiated. It has to be refused.

And refusing this blackmail entails coming to daggers drawn with the blackmailers and also acquiring a different perception of the world, of life, and of the human activity that we now know only in its alienated form: work.

On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs

David Graeber (2013)

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In the year 1930, John Maynard Keynes predicted that, by century's end, technology would have advanced sufficiently that countries like Great Britain or the United States would have achieved a 15-hour work week. There's every reason to believe he was right.

In technological terms, we are quite capable of this. And yet it didn't happen. Instead, technology has been marshaled, if anything, to figure out ways to make us all work more. In order to achieve this, jobs have had to be created that are, effectively, pointless. Huge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed. The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul.

Yet virtually no one talks about it.

Why did Keynes' promised utopia—still being eagerly awaited in the '60s—never materialise?

The standard line today is that he didn't figure in the massive increase in consumerism. Given the choice between fewer hours and more toys and pleasures, we've collectively chosen the latter. This presents a nice morality tale, but even a moment's reflection shows it can't really be true.

Yes, we have witnessed the creation of an endless variety of new jobs and industries since the '20s, but very few have anything to do with the production and distribution of sushi, iPhones, or fancy sneakers.

So what are these new jobs, precisely?

A recent report comparing employment in the US between 1910 and 2000 gives us a clear picture (and I note, one pretty much exactly echoed in the UK).

Over the course of the last century, the number of workers employed as domestic servants, in industry, and in the farm sector has collapsed dramatically. At the same time, "professional, managerial, clerical, sales, and service workers" tripled, growing "from one-quarter to three-quarters of total employment."

In other words, productive jobs have, just as predicted, been largely automated away (even if you count industrial workers globally, including the toiling masses in India and China, such workers are still not nearly so large a percentage of the world population as they used to be).

But rather than allowing a massive reduction of working hours to free the world's population to pursue their own projects, pleasures, visions, and ideas, we have seen the ballooning not even so much of the "service" sector as of the administrative sector, up to and including the creation of whole new industries like financial services or telemarketing, or the unprecedented expansion of sectors like corporate law, academic and health administration, human resources, and public relations. And these numbers do not even reflect on all those people whose job is to provide administrative, technical, or security support for these industries, or for that matter

the whole host of ancillary industries (dog-washers, all-night pizza deliverymen) that only exist because everyone else is spending so much of their time working in all the other ones.

These are what I propose to call "bullshit jobs."

It's as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs just for the sake of keeping us all working. And here, precisely, lies the mystery. In capitalism, this is precisely what is *not* supposed to happen. Sure, in the old inefficient socialist states like the Soviet Union, where employment was considered both a right and a sacred duty, the system made up as many jobs as they had to (this is why in Soviet department stores it took three clerks to sell a piece of meat). But, of course, this is the very sort of problem market competition is supposed to fix.

According to economic theory, at least, the last thing a profit-seeking firm is going to do is shell out money to workers they don't really need to employ. Still, somehow, it happens.

While corporations may engage in ruthless downsizing, the layoffs and speed-ups invariably fall on that class of people who are actually making, moving, fixing and maintaining things; through some strange alchemy no one can quite explain, the number of salaried paper-pushers ultimately seems to expand, and more and more employees find themselves, not unlike Soviet workers actually, working forty- or even fifty-hour weeks on paper, but effectively working fifteen hours just as Keynes predicted, since the rest of their time is spent organising or attending motivational seminars, updating their facebook profiles, or downloading TV box-sets.

The answer clearly isn't economic: it's moral and political. The ruling class has figured out that a happy and productive population with free time on their hands is a mortal danger (think of what started to happen when this even began to be approximated in the '60s).

And, on the other hand, the feeling that work is a moral value in itself, and that anyone not willing to submit themselves to some kind of intense work discipline for most of their waking hours deserves nothing, is extraordinarily convenient for them.

Once, when contemplating the apparently endless growth of administrative responsibilities in British academic departments, I came up with one possible vision of hell. Hell is a collection of individuals who are spending the bulk of their time working on a task they don't like and are not especially good at. Say they were hired because they were excellent cabinet-makers, and then discover they are expected to spend a great deal of their time frying fish.

Neither does the task really need to be done—at least, there's only a very limited number of fish that need to be fried. Yet somehow, they all become so obsessed with resentment at the thought that some of their co-workers might be spending more time making cabinets, and not doing their fair share of the fish-frying responsibilities, that before long there's endless piles of useless badly cooked fish piling up all over the workshop and it's all that anyone really does.

I think this is actually a pretty accurate description of the moral dynamics of our own economy.

Now, I realise any such argument is going to run

into immediate objections: "who are you to say what jobs are really 'necessary'? What's necessary anyway? You're an anthropology professor, what's the 'need' for that?" (And indeed a lot of tabloid readers would take the existence of my job as the very definition of wasteful social expenditure.) And on one level, this is obviously true. There can be no objective measure of social value.

I would not presume to tell someone who is convinced they are making a meaningful contribution to the world that, really, they are not. But what about those people who are themselves convinced their jobs are meaningless?

Not long ago I got back in touch with a school friend who I hadn't seen since I was 12. I was amazed to discover that in the interim, he had become first a poet, then the front man in an indie rock band. I'd heard some of his songs on the radio having no idea the singer was someone I actually knew. He was obviously brilliant, innovative, and his work had unquestionably brightened and improved the lives of people all over the world.

Yet, after a couple of unsuccessful albums, he'd lost his contract, and plagued with debts and a newborn daughter, ended up, as he put it, "taking the default choice of so many directionless folk: law school." Now he's a corporate lawyer working in a prominent New York firm. He was the first to admit that his job was utterly meaningless, contributed nothing to the world, and, in his own estimation, should not really exist.

There's a lot of questions one could ask here, starting with, what does it say about our society that it seems to generate an extremely limited demand for talented

poet–musicians, but an apparently infinite demand for specialists in corporate law? (Answer: if 1% of the population controls most of the disposable wealth, what we call "the market" reflects what *they* think is useful or important, not anybody else.) But even more, it shows that most people in these jobs are ultimately aware of it.

In fact, I'm not sure I've ever met a corporate lawyer who didn't think their job was bullshit. The same goes for almost all the new industries outlined above. There is a whole class of salaried professionals that, should you meet them at parties and admit that you do something that might be considered interesting (an anthropologist, for example), will want to avoid even discussing their line of work entirely. Give them a few drinks, and they will launch into tirades about how pointless and stupid their job really is.

This is a profound psychological violence here. How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labour when one secretly feels one's job should not exist? How can it not create a sense of deep rage and resentment. Yet it is the peculiar genius of our society that its rulers have figured out a way, as in the case of the fish-fryers, to ensure that rage is directed precisely against those who actually do get to do meaningful work. For instance: in our society, there seems a general rule that, the more obviously one's work benefits other people, the less one is likely to be paid for it. Again, an objective measure is hard to find, but one easy way to get a sense is to ask: what would happen were this entire class of people to simply disappear? Say what you like about nurses, garbage collectors, or mechanics, it's obvious that were they to

vanish in a puff of smoke, the results would be immediate and catastrophic.

A world without teachers or dock-workers would soon be in trouble, and even one without science fiction writers or ska musicians would clearly be a lesser place. It's not entirely clear how humanity would suffer were all private equity CEOs, lobbyists, PR researchers, actuaries, telemarketers, bailiffs, or legal consultants to similarly vanish. (Many suspect it might markedly improve.) Yet apart from a handful of well-touted exceptions (doctors), the rule holds surprisingly well.

Even more perverse, there seems to be a broad sense that this is the way things should be. This is one of the secret strengths of right-wing populism. You can see it when tabloids whip up resentment against tube workers for paralysing London during contract disputes: the very fact that tube workers can paralyse London shows that their work is actually necessary, but this seems to be precisely what annoys people.

It's even clearer in the US, where Republicans have had remarkable success mobilizing resentment against school teachers, or auto workers (and not, significantly, against the school administrators or auto industry managers who actually cause the problems) for their supposedly bloated wages and benefits. It's as if they are being told "but you get to teach children! Or make cars! You get to have real jobs! And on top of that you have the nerve to also expect middle-class pensions and health care?"

If someone had designed a work regime perfectly suited to maintaining the power of finance capital, it's hard to see how they could have done a better job. Real,

productive workers are relentlessly squeezed and exploited.

The remainder are divided between a terrorised stratum of the—universally reviled—unemployed and a larger stratum who are basically paid to do nothing in positions designed to make them identify with the perspectives and sensibilities of the ruling class (managers, administrators, etc)—and particularly its financial avatars—but, at the same time, foster a simmering resentment against anyone whose work has clear and undeniable social value.

Clearly, the system was never consciously designed. It emerged from almost a century of trial and error. But it is the only explanation for why, despite our technological capacities, we are not all working three to four hour days.

Antiwork—A Radical Shift in How We View Jobs

Brian Dean (2014)

Over a decade into the 21st century, we seem as work-obsessed as ever. Is it time for a progressive reframing of work and leisure? Antiwork is a moral alternative to the obsession with jobs that has plagued our society for too long. It's a project to radically reframe work and leisure. It's also a cognitive antidote to the pernicious culture of hard work, which has taken over our minds as well as our precious time.

Big shifts have occurred this year. While politicians preached about hardworking families, unconditional basic income went viral and was adopted as long-term policy by the Green Party. Social media campaigns, meanwhile, made it increasingly difficult for companies and charities to benefit from the forced labour schemes known to most as workfare.

The facts and figures generally don't support the rose-tinted political view of work. Studies consistently show how jobs keep many of us poor while also making us ill, stressed, exhausted and demoralised.

As Julia Unwin, chief executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, put it: "Hard work is not working."

But facts and figures alone don't bring about change. Our cognitive frames for work tend to be anachronistic. The existing structures of our language/concepts in this area aren't neutral—they predispose us to think conservatively. The rightwing press constantly talk about the

workshy, etc, because the concept activates morally loaded frames that are impossible to argue against with facts alone.

Antiwork addresses this moral dimension and reframes the whole issue from a progressive standpoint.

Work as virtue—the existing moral frame

Work is seen as a virtue, but it covers the moral spectrum from charity and art to forced labour and banking. Belief in the inherent moral good of work has been used historically in social engineering, notably during the shift from agriculture to industry, when the Protestant work ethic was used to motivate workers and to justify punishment, including whipping and imprisonment of idlers. (In *The Making of the English Working Class*, historian EP Thompson describes how the ethos of Protestant sects such as Methodism effectively provided the prototype of the disciplined, punctual worker required by the factory owners.)

Work's assumed virtue has always been about more than its utility or market value. George Lakoff, the cognitive linguist, provided a clue in the frame of "work as obedience." The first virtue we learn as children is *obeying* our parents, particularly in performing tasks we don't enjoy. Later, as adults, we're paid to obey our employers—it's called work.

Work and virtue are thus connected in our neurology in terms of obedience to authority. That's not the only cognitive frame we have for the virtue of work, but it's the one that is constantly reinforced by what Lakoff calls the "strict father" conservative moral system.

This "strictness" moral framing is implicit, for example, in the current welfare system. An increasingly punitive approach is adopted towards those who don't follow the prescribed job-seeking regimen—a trend that most political parties seem to approve of. Politicians boast of getting "tough on dependency culture," and when they talk of "clamping down" on the "hardcore unemployed," you'd think they were referring to criminals.

Emphasis on punishment is the sign of an obedience frame. Work itself has a long history as punishment for disobedience, as the Book of Genesis illustrates— Adam and Eve had no work until they disobeyed God, who imposed it as their punishment: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life."

Unpaid work, or "community service," is still sometimes dictated as punishment by courts. Workfare programmes similarly involve mandatory work without wages—it looks very much like punishment for the "sin" of unemployment. Workfare illustrates a difference between framing and spin. The cognitive frame is paternalistic, morally strict, punishment-based (much like "community service"), while the political spin is all about helping people integrate back into society. Genuine help, of course, shouldn't require the threat of losing what little income one has.

Morally, it seems that politicians, most of the media, and a large section of the public are still stuck in the Puritan codes and scripts that, following the Reformation and into the industrial revolution, dominated social attitudes to work and idleness in England, America, and

much of Europe.

In fact, when reading early accounts of the treatment of what Calvin called "lazy good-for-nothings," you get a strong sense of déjà vu. Christian charity—Calvinist style—didn't extend to the "idle poor," who were viewed as outside God's chosen and thus unsaveable. Poverty is still widely viewed as a moral failure of the individual, unless the self-flagellation of uninterrupted hard work is on display.

Incidentally, if you think you're free from this moral script, try an experiment; spend a whole day in bed doing absolutely nothing, then spend another two days being lazier than you've ever been before—deluxe, self-indulgent laziness, *relaxo supremo*. Do nothing that could remotely be considered work. Observe your reactions and moods during this period. (And if you do break through, and time stops, and you experience the unburdening liberation of simply being… congratulations—that's antiwork.)

Leisure—the flip side of work

The concept of leisure tends to reinforce the work frame. *Leisure is non-work for the sake of work. Leisure is the time spent recovering from work and in the frenzied but hopeless attempt to forget about work.* (Bob Black "The Abolition of Work.")

Most of us would like far more leisure—we dream of it. But we believe it comes with a price. And so we resent the unemployed for (supposedly) "sitting around all day," while we identify with our jobs and righteously grumble, or boast, about our hard work, like demented subjects in a behaviourist's divide-and-rule experiment.

Leisure, like happiness, tends to be seen as something that's earned through work. The underlying idea is that you're endlessly undeserving—that reward, ie happiness, will always be contingent on the endurance of some unpleasant activity (eg "hard work"). Again, we could trace this notion to early moral ideas—eg original sin and redemption through suffering—but the important point is that we seem to have a nasty, and very persistent, cultural neurosis in the form of an archaic cognitive frame for work and leisure.

Laid on top of this work/leisure neurosis is consumerism—the idea that spending money will make you happy. This is like toffee coating on a bad Puritan apple. If you spend enough money to give you the (advertised) conditions for happiness, the neurosis emerges in the form of random worries or vague, guilty feelings about not working hard enough. This, along with the *work as obedience* frame, may explain why we're contributing £29bn worth of free labour (in unpaid overtime) to British employers each year, according to TUC figures.

Antiwork and radical politics

Consumerism is, of course, opposed by many on moral grounds. Anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist politics focus on corporate greed and its effects, but not usually on the work ethic and the obsession with jobs. Maximising employment is often tacitly accepted as good, and sometimes even promoted. ZNet's Michael Albert, for example, argued, in a Guardian article, that "full employment" should be one of the main demands of the Occupy movement.

I see plenty of irony in this.

As Sharon Beder notes, in *Selling the Work Ethic*, what distinguished the rise of the capitalist edifice from traditional concentrations of wealth and power was precisely the moral ethos of work and Protestant-style discipline: *The asceticism of Protestantism ensured that the money made by capitalists was not wastefully spent but was reinvested to make more capital.*

Although the religious roots of this ethos later gave way to "utilitarian worldliness" (as Max Weber put it), the moral framing of work as a virtue in its own right continues to serve the interests of big business and conservative politics. But rather than morally reframe the issue along progressive lines, many on the left claim the existing ethic as their own, fully identifying with the narrative of "hard work," "full employment," "tough on the workshy," etc.

So, while consumerism and capitalism are widely protested, a moral justification of the status quo remains in place, largely unquestioned. It takes many forms—shouted from tabloid headlines about "benefit cheats," or quietly echoed across all media with daily "austerity" framing. The reaction, if any, from the left, leaves the strict moral framing of work unchallenged, and usually reinforced. This is where the progressive approach of antiwork is needed.

Antiwork—follow your bliss

Antiwork is what we do out of love, fun, interest, talent, enthusiasm, inspiration, etc. Only a lucky few get paid enough from it to live on, yet it probably enriches our

lives and benefits society more than most jobs do.

Our yearnings for antiwork remain largely unexpressed, as they don't fit existing semantic frameworks. This is precisely why we need the concept. The existing work/leisure dichotomy divides our lives in a way that serves narrow market interests and distorts our evaluation of unpaid activity. This isn't just a matter of surface language and word definitions—it concerns cognitive frames that shape how we think, ultimately determining social and economic policy.

Antiwork has both negative and positive aspects. The negative is a clear expression of what we choose *not* to do. Melville's Bartleby put it best: "I would prefer not to"—the most radical response one can make in an all-pervasive jobs culture.

Antiwork is also a rejection of what we regard as pointless or immoral work. This might include any form of forced or subtly coerced labour, work that serves no positive purpose (in the opinion of those doing the work), work that has harmful consequences (physical, psychological, environmental), etc.

If the studies I've read over the years are anything to go by, more than half of existing jobs in the UK could be classed as immoral or pointless. I remember reading a Guardian report on the 1993 British Social Attitudes survey, which found that around 60% of British workers were unhappy in their work and were inclined (more than workers in other countries surveyed) to "feel their work is not useful to society".

Similar survey findings appear fairly regularly. Most recently, the Independent on Sunday cited a YouGov poll

which found that "only a third of us report looking forward to going to work, the rest are either ambivalent or dread it." A *New York Times* piece, meanwhile, summarised one of the biggest-ever surveys of the American workplace by stating: *For most of us, in short, work is a depleting, dispiriting experience, and in some obvious ways, it's getting worse.*

David Graeber's essay, On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs, continues the theme of dehumanising work, and articulates the antiwork perspective on needless job creation. Graeber points to the ballooning of the administrative sector (more than the so-called service sector) and the disappearance, resulting from automation, of productive jobs. He says we have a morally and spiritually damaging system in which huge swathes of people *spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed.*

On the positive side, antiwork could be defined as any activity, or non-activity, which you value in its own right, not as a means to an end. Which isn't to say that antiwork must be inherently pleasant—it's simply chosen action (or non-action), accepted as it is, not collected like Brownie points towards some deferred moment of "earned" happiness. It's always done for its own sake, in contrast to work, which is never done for its own sake (by my definition).

Work will doubtless always be necessary, but hopefully reduced to a minimum. Bertrand Russell wrote that "the road to happiness and prosperity lies in an organised diminution of work." But this seems unlikely to happen while work is framed as the virtuous side of a moral

dichotomy. The point of antiwork is to think of good human activity outside the dominant cognitive frames of market value and obedience.

It's also about letting go of some misplaced sentimental attachments to "honest work" (still common on the left, alas).

As Robert Anton Wilson once put it, *most 'work' in this age is stupid, monotonous, brain-rotting, irritating, usually pointless and basically consists of the agonising process of being slowly bored to death over a period of about forty to forty-five years of drudgery.*

From the Realm of Necessity to the Realm of Freedom

Kevin Carson (2016)

What do we mean by "the abolition of work"?

The phrase may refer to a society in which human physical activity is literally no longer involved in producing physical means of subsistence like food, clothing and shelter. Advocates of "fully automated luxury communism" are probably close to this kind of literalism, for example. But I have no idea whether most people who refer to the abolition of work mean it in this way—and it certainly doesn't carry this meaning of necessity.

I don't use it in this way myself.

When I say "the abolition of work," what I refer to abolishing is, first of all, the distinction between purely economic or productive activity and other forms of activity like socializing or play.

And second, I mean abolition of the element of compulsion—that is, of any necessary connection between such "productive" effort and consumption of the necessities of life.

And finally, "abolition" can mean *progressive* abolition, in the sense of 1) an ongoing reduction in the share of the means of subsistence which must be obtained through effort which is undertaken only in the face of necessity, and would otherwise not be undertaken, and/or 2) an ongoing reduction in the amount of such effort as a share of total life activity.

To a large extent the distinction between "work" and

other forms of activity is a social construct, reflecting the existence of political, economic and social subordination and of exploitative relationships by which subordinates are forced to devote a significant share of their efforts to serving the needs of superiors in return for being allowed to meet their own needs. In this schema "work" is activity undertaken under duress, primarily in service to ends which are not one's own, and "non-work" is activity undertaken for its own sake.

In hunter-gatherer societies, some time was devoted (as implied by the very name used to classify such societies) to the effort of procuring food. But it was a relatively modest number of hours compared to the modern work week, it was undertaken by a society of equals in which relations of compulsion or exploitation were absent, and the boundaries between food procurement and socializing or play were quite blurry. To put it in Biblical terms, even before Adam was cursed with the necessity to eat bread by the sweat of his brow, he and Eve still occupied themselves with tending the Garden whose fruits they ate.

Even in peasant societies after the agricultural revolution, before the rise of the state and of class stratification, the hours of labor required for subsistence production were fairly low compared to the present work week when no extra labor was required to feed landlords, priests, soldiers or kings. And the agricultural calendar was liberally leavened with feast days and holidays (which were mostly abolished in early modern Europe along with the Enclosure process, as a means of increasing the ratio of surplus labor to necessary labor).

And such customary societies, even if they didn't

unconditionally guarantee subsistence to everyone regardless of ability to work, nevertheless had aspects roughly analogous to contemporary proposals for a Universal Basic Income. For example, up until the modern era of enclosures and land expropriations, in village societies around the world it was standard for each family to have a customarily defined number of strips assigned in each open field, and a defined right of common pasturage. Rights of common access to wood, fen and waste involved free scavenging of berries and wild game, firewood and so on. And rights of gleaning provided additional subsistence rights to those without other means of social support.

In our era the technological and social trends are towards reduced labor requirements for material output, as well as towards a blurring of the lines between "economic" and other forms of social activity. In this regard the post-modern recapitulates the pre-modern era, on a much higher technological level.

Even with existing levels of technology, eliminating the institutional pathologies of corporate capitalism—surplus labor to feed the privileged rentier classes, guard labor resulting from privilege and concentration of wealth, waste production and planned obsolescence to prevent the idle industrial capacity that naturally results from over-investment and under-consumption—would probably reduce necessary labor time to fifteen hours a week or less.

The radical cheapening and ephemeralization of production technology is rapidly removing entry barriers to small-scale production for use in the social economy. And along with this a growing share of the "means of

production" is coextensive with "social capital" (workers' skills, tacit knowledge, social relationships, etc).

As the autonomists Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt put it in *Commonwealth*:

> *the trend toward the hegemony or prevalence of immaterial production in the processes of capitalist valorization.... Images, information, knowledge, affects, codes, and social relationships... are coming to outweigh material commodities or the material aspects of commodities in the capitalist valorization process. This means, of course, not that the production of material goods... is disappearing or even declining in quantity but rather that their value is increasingly dependent on and subordinated to immaterial factors and goods.*

The growing significance of our social relationships and knowledge as means sources of value, coupled with the increasing affordability of physical capital, mean that it's possible for ordinary people to take their productive activity into the cooperative, informal economy and for the boundaries between work and the rest of social life to dissolve as they did to a certain extent for hunter-gatherers, cottagers before Enclosure, and the like.

As human social relationships replace the aggregation of physical capital as the main source of productivity, the withering away of material scarcity as the basis of exchange value will cause those specific forms of human activity and relationships we call economic to dissolve into the larger category of general social relationships. Human beings will meet a growing share of their material subsistence needs through activities we would currently classify as socializing or play.

And whatever minimum of physical effort remains necessary for producing our physical subsistence needs in the near future, the element of compulsion or necessity will become less and less prominent.

Instead the remainder of necessary physical work will be split up into short bursts of a variety of kinds of self-directed effort, interwoven into the broader tapestry of the day's activities, whether it be as described by Marx in *The German Ideology*, with it being

> *possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.*

...or by Thomas "Nailer Tom" Hazzard, a New Englander of the 1780s, in his own journal:

> *Making bridle bits, worked a garden, dug a woodchuck out of a hole, made stone wall for cousin, planted corn, cleaned cellar, made hoe handle of bass wood, sold a kettle, brought Sister Tanner in a fish boat, made hay, went for coal, made nails at night, went huckleberrying, raked oats, plowed turnip lot, went to monthly meeting and carried Sister Tanner behind me, bought a goose, went to see town, put on new shoes, made a shingle nail tool, helped George mend a spindle for the mill, went to harbor mouth gunning, killed a Rover, hooped tubs, caught a weasel, made nails, made a shovel, went swimming, staid at home, made rudder irons, went eeling.*

As Ralph Borsodi, the source of the quote (*This Ugly Civilization*), pointed out regarding Hazzard's list of activities:

> *The day was not divided by the clock into mutually*
> *exclusive periods of work and non-work. Most of the*
> *play had an admixture of productive labor in it—it*
> *produced game or fish, for instance, while much of the*
> *work had elements of play in it.*

Of course the capitalists are doing their best to prevent this, just as they always have. To quote Negri and Hardt again:

> *Capitalist accumulation today is increasingly external*
> *to the production process, such that exploitation takes*
> *the form of expropriation of the common.*

"Expropriation of the common," in this case, means enclosure of the social knowledge commons and human relationships that are increasingly central to production, as a source of rent.

So our struggle must center on 1) prefigurative politics and counter-institution building, to shift as much as possible of the meeting of our material needs into the cooperative social sphere under our own control, and 2) circumventing the monopolies and artificial scarcities by which the propertied classes attempt to enclose the productivity of our social relationships, by building the kinds of "non-state spaces" James Scott wrote about in *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

Fortunately the very technological advances in low-cost means of physical production, and in networked communications, that make our cooperative social relationships so productive without the need for large accumulations of capital, also render the artificial scarcities and artificial property rights the capitalists depend on for their rents increasingly unenforceable.

Divesting from the System:
Spotlight on Jobs

MayMay (2014)

I recently got an awesome email. In part, it read:
Your recent post, Rolequeerness Is Not About Sex, finally spurred me to ask you about living without a job. I'm aware that subjecting myself to paid employment perpetuates a system that's holding a gun to our collective head. If you've found an alternative, I want to know how to implement that instead.
I don't know what I have to offer other non-corporate people that would be valuable enough for them to want to keep me alive. […]
You're the closest I've found to someone who isn't screwing other people over and is following what they consider their purpose. If you point out books I will read them, if you show me how to educate myself I will do that. I want the options you've carved out for yourself unless giving away how it's done would deprive you of them. […]
I was (secularly) homeschooled for part of my life, and there's a backhandedly toxic, individualist culture in that which makes announcing that I'm not a genius who can solve every problem I have via self-teaching and observation an admission of personal failure. That's kept me from feeling like I deserved help when it would make a huge difference to me whether or not I had it. Asking you to help me figure out how to make economic options for myself is difficult; not least because I'm asking two interrelated things—how you've made yourself into someone who can get money easily when you really can't work around it, and how you're minimizing your need for it—that are both seriously

empowering. I can't assure you that I'll only do what you would want with the information you give me. But since you seem more concerned with making people ungovernable than you do with whether anyone, anywhere might abuse your methods … maybe that's not necessary. I want to be ungovernable and tear this whole unjust, soul-eating capitalist system down. You're giving me hope that this can be done, but hope doesn't give me a course of action and, much as I hate to admit it, I haven't been able to fill in all the spaces in what you say for myself.

I responded privately and figured I'd leave it at that. But I've been having some discussions about topics related to this on Facebook today and, well, in the spirit of appealing for safer spaces to have intellectual explorations, I figured I'd put my half-baked thoughts into a more public realm, after all. See also: my policy on republishing/reprudcing/copying my words and my works. (TL;DR: Please do it.)

So, here's my answer to the question, "How do you live without a job?"

This is a really great question. Unfortunately, I don't immediately know how to answer because what I'm doing isn't something I followed some kind of guidebook for. I just kind of started doing it. In the same way that someone who's been walking all their life would probably have a hard time explaining the mechanics of walking, I'm finding that I have a hard time explaining how I go about living without a job.

That said, this is something I've been wanting to write about for a really long time. I just don't know how to go about doing it yet. I thought that maybe I'd make a new "travel" blog, copy from some of what I see other

people writing about in terms of travel adventures. I did some googling for terms like "technomad" to try and get out of the filter bubble of tourist info blogs, or advice sites like WikiTravel.com. But sadly these terms are almost entirely co-opted by "location-independent entrepreneurs" who are doing everything wrong. Sure, they don't have a location, but they have a job. I'm the opposite. I have many locations, but no job.

So maybe my answer to you should begin by saying that contrary to appearances, I'm actually hyper-local, not location-independent.

See, a "job" is a cog in the machinery of globalization. Jobs are designed to make you do something specific, specialized, and rigid. But nothing of significance can be accomplished if you only do one thing over and over again. Significant things require many interlocking parts working together to achieve something greater than the sum of their parts. That's what humans are really good at, and that's why systems of oppression such as "jobs" (and, by the way, academia) is all designed to break you up (figuratively, if not literally) into only a few narrow slivers of who you are.

"Janitor," for instance, is a word that means "person who cleans things." But what is the difference between "a janitor" and "a person who cleans things?" Well, one could start by asking "what is being cleaned?" Janitors rarely consider themselves janitors when what they are cleaning is their own bathroom. And yet they do still have to clean their own bathrooms (if they have a bathroom of their own, that is). Do they hire janitors for that? No, that would be silly (or impractical, since janitors rarely make

enough money to hire cleaning professionals).

Perhaps more pointedly, what is the difference between "a photographer" and "a person who takes photographs?" Do you suddenly become "a photographer" if you have a camera phone and you take a picture of a beautiful sunny day? The answer depends on what you perceive the function to be, of "the class of people who take photographs."

I'm not going to answer any of these questions for you because you seem like the kind of person who's willing to do some of your own work figuring it out. But what I will do is recommend some "reading material." A scholar like you might even appreciate the pointers. And by reading material I just mean links to click and content to consume and more pointers that will lead to ever more links to click and content to consume.

Start at Clay Shirky's "Institutions vs. collaborations."

This short talk is the meat from his fantastic book, *Here Comes Everybody* (also worth a read if that's your thing) and while it's not specifically anti-capitalist, it has a lot of information that you can use to better understand why jobs are terrible things. Better than that, though, it also accessibly explains how the tools we have available today (like the Internet) actually work, rather than how people think they work, and this is very much part of my own answer.

I should stop here to remind you that I'm not magical; personally, my ability to "live without a job" is very much tied to the (techno-)privileges I have as a person who others think has a magical ability to talk to computers. The bulk of my monetary income these days

are donations for the many freeware software programs I've written. You are probably aware of some of them (like the Predator Alert Tools), since I blog pretty regularly about them. Maybe you're even tangentially aware of some of the other more activist-focused stuff I've written, like the WP-Seedbank plugin. Again, I signal boost that stuff a lot because it's directly related to my larger goal of shooting capitalism and all its enforcers in the head, and then skinning them for food.

But a lot of donations that I get are also for software that has nothing to do, directly, with activist goals.

For instance, one of my most popular tools is a WordPress plugin called the "Inline Google Spreadsheet Viewer," and it does what it says on the tin. It takes a public, published Google Spreadsheet, parses its content, and displays it as an HTML table on a page powered by a WordPress blog. But I didn't sit down one day and go, "Hmm, I wonder what I should make." Rather, someone came to me and was like, "I need an easy way to make a table appear on my WordPress blog. How do I do that?" And I looked around and was like, "Well, you seem to like Google Spreadsheets. Why don't you just keep using that and I'll make whatever you put in this specific Google Spreadsheet automatically appear on your blog where you want it?"

They said great, then I wrote a tool specifically for them to do this thing, then they paid me $400, and then I spent another couple of hours generalizing the code I wrote for them and wrapping it up in a distributable plugin for everyone else to use. That was 3 years ago. Since then, I've made a couple hundred more dollars in

donations for that tool alone. Several hundred dollars over 3 years might not sound like very much, and in isolation maybe it's not. But I didn't ★do★ anything to get that other money, it just sort of appeared in front of me because I made it easy for people to donate to me.

So that's another part of my answer: you don't "live without a job," you just LIVE, and in the living, you MAKE and DO stuff that is valuable *for you and your friends.* But you do the extra work to make the thing that was useful for you accessible to other people who you don't already know. You already know how to do this, because you were taught to do that in school. It's called "writing a bibliography" in that context and in my context it's called "writing good code comments and making an easily-installable software program." But the concept is the same.

Take a look at my Cyberbusking.org page. It's not designed to sell anything. It's just designed to make it super easy for someone who wants to help me out actually successfully help me out. The question I asked myself when I made that page was not "How do I get people to believe I'm worth keeping alive?" It was "How do I help the people who want to keep me alive help me stay alive?"

You're never going to ask that question if you don't think you're worth much alive. And capitalism is *all about* making people believe that in order to have any value in *being* alive, they have to *do* something to earn it, first.

Fuck. That. Shit.

The school system also teaches this idea. That's what grades are for. And here I'll pause to point you at the

writings of school abolitionists like John Taylor Gatto
and Ivan Illich. There's plenty of anti-schooling material
on my blog, and you should perhaps start there. Both
John Taylor Gatto's book and Ivan Illich's book are freely
available online.[1]

Contemporary mandatory education is one of the
prerequisites for a classist society. And they're not even
subtle about it. Why do you think children are divided,
according to characteristics like age, into "classes"?

The relationship between school and jobs should be
obvious, and any intimate relationship between one
oppressive institution is definitionally supported by the
institutions people are expected to engage with before
that one. In other words, if you want to destroy jobs,
then you also have to destroy mandatory schooling at the
same time.

I should also mention that I'm atypical in this regard,
too, because I dropped out of middle school. And I guess
there's a lesson in that, too: sheer willpower.

I made a conscious decision about my life in second
grade that I would work towards escaping schooling, and
although it took almost 10 years, I finally did actually
succeed. In the same way that I make myself ungovern-
able to social norms, I made myself ungovernable to
school administrators. I was a "good kid" who just
wouldn't play ball. And most importantly, I stopped being
afraid of the threats like "you'll never get a job." Also,

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1 *The Underground History of American Education* by John Taylor Gatto.
(Very US-centric history here, I know, but relevant to mandatory school-
ing more generally, so if you're not in the US take this first with a bit of
an open mind.)
Deschooling Society by Ivan Illich.

notice, again, the relationship between schooling and its coercive threats. No one cares about bad grades except insofar as they think it will mean they can't get a good job. Turns out that's a lie.

Money is the same kind of lie. Nobody cares about money. They care about the things money gives to them, like food, and clothes, and social status. If you can get food and clothes and social status without money, then why spend any brainpower worrying about money at all?

That's the other thing I've done, also visible on my Cyberbusking.org donations page: I ask for money, but I also ask *directly* for food, and shelter. Here's a fun fact: when I added food-donation options, my monetary donations increased. Why? Because *nobody gives a fuck about money* except that they all *think* they do, and so they're much more willing to give money to someone who asks for it when it's clear that this money is being asked for in order *to get food*. It's a social hack: if you're more willing to give someone food than money (Because Capitalism Brainwashing) then I don't ask you for money, I ask you for food. Then you're not thinking of the money you're giving me as money, you're thinking of it as food-tokens. This, by the way, is how Las Vegas works: why do you think people gamble with $1 chips instead of $1 bills? What's the difference between a $1 chip and a $1 bill? In theory: nothing. In practice: everything.

But I also just practiced a *bunch* of other things to make myself not need to ask for help. And I lean on my strengths to make that possible. I find dumpsters to go dumpster-diving in by asking locals, looking them up on FallingFruit.org (which also has a bunch of good urban

food foraging sites), by keeping detailed records of my own, and then contributing those records back to places that accept it. I use FreeCampsites.net to avoid the need for hotels, and when I find a place I can sleep in my car that would be useful to add to that database, I add it to the database. I *participate* in a way most people are trained not to.

Let's stop here again for a moment to consider what it means to "participate" in a world like ours. If you're not already familiar with it, go look up the 90-9-1 principle, also called the 1% rule. There are some good critiques of it but the basic premise is simply that there are fewer people who create content than those who consume content. This is partly just Because Physics, but also partly because *mass consumerism was the intended goal of mass mandatory schooling.* So whereas someone else might find FreeCamp-sites.net and use it to look up information, I do that *and* I've got a thought in the back of my mind that I can add to it, too. And I do that with everything, not just websites.

I do that with my own stuff. I don't buy bandaids, I buy gauze pads and medical paper tape, because a bandaid is just a gauze pad and some adhesive. But I can do a lot more with medical tape and gauze pads than I can with Bandaids®.

Plus, just like you spend less money when you buy ingredients and cook them yourself instead of going out to eat, the ingredients of medical supplies are cheaper to get than the one-use item capitalism trains you to want. I call this the "coffee filter problem," or more generally the "the er-suffix fallacy." That is, capitalism (and schools, and marketers, and so on) trains you to think that "in order to filter coffee, you need a coffee filt*er*." But it turns out you can filter coffee using anything that you can strain

small bits in: cheesecloths work, plus those are reusable.

I didn't know all this when I started living without a job. I learned about it over time. And I didn't just learn about it because Magic. I learned about it because I put myself in relatively high risk situations in which if I didn't learn it, I'd be at best uncomfortable and at worst dead.

I learned that having a bed is not about having a mattress, it's about finding a place to sleep and then *making* my bed. Which doesn't, to me, mean "folding the sheets." It means "putting the pieces of a bed together in a place where I can sleep." When I'm "making my bed," I'm literally *creating* a bed for myself, wherever I happen to be. Turns out this is a skill, and it's a learnable one, and it doesn't cost any money.

Yes, I "invested" in a sleeping bag, but my first sleeping bag was a $30 one from Sears. It was good for some things and bad for others, and it was heavy, and it was hard to fold, but it was *cheap* and that let me "fail early, fail often." The next year (before winter), I got another, better sleeping bag. It cost more money (almost $80?), but now I use it *all* the time and I'm *so* glad I got it. My pillow? The day's clothes in the sleeping bag's bag. Is it as comfortable as a queen-sized bed with a down comforter? Well, not usually, but sometimes yes. :) Plus, it's versatile.

And so I guess my point in all this is, it's just as much a lie of capitalism that you can be self-sufficient as it is a lie of capitalism that you can't be self-sufficient. The truth is you're not going to survive on your own, so stop believing that. But you also don't need to rely on other people (and especially the products they try selling you) for most of the things you think you need, both because it turns out you

don't need that much and also because those things aren't actually things you want in the first place.

You don't want money. You want the experience of eating delicious food with your friends in an atmosphere where you feel comfortable chatting and having a good time. I have a lot of "friends" (some of whom I legitimately consider close friends, and some of whom I'm just friendly acquaintances with) and when I go eat out with them, they often pay for me. It's not because I *can't* pay my own way (although depending on the meal, I actually really can't afford it), it's because the thing we're "exchanging" is not about money and food. It's about the relationship in which we get to explore what it's like breaking bread together.

CouchSurfing.org (another life-saver for me) is like this: I don't pay to stay at people's houses with money, but I do pay with my emotional energy, and my time. Sometimes it's still a transaction, and that can be tiring. But it's also really good practice for seeing the cracks of capitalism. Why would someone put me up in their home for two nights if I wasn't going to give them any money?

Humans don't do things for money. We use money to do other things. It's just that most of us still wrongly believe we need the money to do those other things. That's the lie. Money only has power because you believe it does. Gender is only a thing because people think it is. It's the *same* concept. Being genderqueer is not fundamentally different from living without a job. If you can do the one, you can do the other.

But don't *try*. You have to *do*. As a wise old creature once said, "There is no try." ;)

Hope this helps.

—maymay

Anti-Work Commentaries
Preface
Nick Ford

This is the largest section of the book and contains within it perspectives and experiences lived and imagined relating to work. Some of these people have written what they *wish* that had said to a boss and some of them wrote what they actually said and felt proud about.

The first entry in this section is *Thoughts on Employment: So What Do You Do?*, which addresses the theme of individual identity and its interrelation with work. Having our identities subsumed to work is a constant daily annoyance for many people and here Mr. Wilson tackles it head on.

To My Potential New Employer is a crude, painfully accurate take on the relationship many of us have to a would-be boss. We don't like them, we don't *want* to like them, and they sure aren't going to change our minds anytime soon. Here, Serena imagines what it might look like to lay *everything* on the table—and then still go forward with employment.

Adding to that nicely is *Why I Don't Care About You: an open letter to my employer*. MayMay is a blogger and techie who has built many interesting and useful web applications in their time online. This piece shows how telling your boss off is done.

I Quit Because Capitalism takes on how capitalistic monetary systems can corrupt even our most personal relations with each other. This piece also symbolically helps bring together this trio of articles that concerns the process of being asked about a job, our relation to our

bosses and capitalism, and the inevitable conclusion.

Putting Work on Ice is a fascinating look at what it takes to work in Antarctica and the sorts of conditions you have to deal with. Arlee is an impressive writer who describes in detail both the joyous and horrendous circumstances, and also delve into the differences between a job and work (interestingly they support work, but oppose jobs).

Should We Have The Right to Not Work? explores the relationship between the avid anti-work individual and the rest of the population. Is it possible to avoid work in a moral way while putting the costs on others?

Does Work Undermine Our Freedom? explores Julia Maskivker's article "Employment as a Limitation on Self-Ownership." As before, Danaher introduces thought-provoking arguments and premises that enable anti-work advocates to give more thorough treatments, this time with how work constricts our autonomy.

Inclined Labor tells the story of how the author was able to appreciate the effort he puts into his project without falling prey to the glamorization of work. Grant seamlessly blends storytelling with truth-telling in his articles and this is no different.

Stress, Labor, & Play is by the ever-forceful William Gillis, who takes some anti-work ideas to task for being anti-stress and not anti-work. Gillis makes remarks that are worth considering, such as the relationship between play and work in a free society.

The Ecology of Play is a piece that opens up the possibilities for a post-work world and how it frames play. Grant goes over the usual arguments in favor of play but with stunning clarity and grace that should give anyone a reflective pause.

Thoughts on Employment:
"So What Do You Do?"
Mr. Wilson (2014)

So what do you do?

The question inevitably comes up when meeting new people or people you have not seen in a while. In the English speaking world the question is shorthand for "what do you do to support yourself financially." It seems to carry with it the implicit assumption that one's identity is wrapped up entirely in his or her means of generating an income. I find it troubling that this is the case. I have worked quite a few positions since I was old enough to be employed, and while I got various degrees of satisfaction and enjoyment from each (ranging from very little to quite a bit), even the most rewarding and noble employment positions I have held are not things I want to define myself by or wrap my identity in.

In all honesty, the work I do for money tends to be the most mundane part of my day, and I do it largely in order to fund my other activities. I have held multiple volunteer positions in various nonprofits, coordinated awesome events with notable public figures appearing, contributed to multiple blogs and pod-casts, and have done a great deal of volunteer work. I have met and interacted with quite a few people that I place among my personal heroes and have gotten to travel to many different places.

Additionally, I work with wildlife, I a play the guitar (badly, I admit), and I frequently go camping, hiking and

skateboarding. I am a decent cook, an armchair political theorist and philosopher, a prolific reader, a constant dispenser of opinion and I know my way around a record store. I have also been told that I am wonderful romantic partner, a good friend and a solid family member. All of these things are far more important to "what I do" than my official means of employment at any given time.

Even if I did nothing outside the workday, but watch television and sit on my bum, I would still have the same attitude. While many people out there do have rewarding jobs that they actually live for, most of us work because we have to and tend to consider the time spent at work as time that we would just assume spend elsewhere.

This is especially true, in this day and age; when some of the biggest employers tend to be massive call centers or offices filled with endless homogenous cubicles. The reality many of us live in is more like *Dilbert* or *Office Space* than it is to anything glamorous that we want to be remembered for. Work for many Americans is mundane, soul-crushing and mind numbing, and it is tragic that many of the people who are working these positions are grateful to be there, only because unemployment is so much worse.

This experience is only going to become more common as we live in an economy where much of the meaningful work has either been, or will be deskilled, mechanized, computerized and automated out of existence.

Unfortunately, the benefits of this increased productivity are largely being concentrated in the hands of a minority of owners managers and shareholders. Rest of

us are still expected to work just as many tedious hours to support himself, as we were a few generations ago, despite the unprecedented growth in productivity.

I say we use this increased productivity, that results from labor saving technology to save us from the need spent so much of our time laboring. I am open to any ideas as to how we can do this. In the meantime, I'd like to remind all our readers that you are not your job.

To My Potential New Employer

Serena Ragia (2016)

To My Potential New Employer,
I despise work.

I loathe the very concept of work, that officially sanctioned thief that steals my life away one shift at a time. I especially detest the idea that I have to work for someone like you. Don't take it too personally; our master/wage-slave relationship has specific qualities that cannot be overcome. You see, you and I are competing in The Capitalist Game. The nasty, brutish, and overly long game of modern life and death. I have boiled the basics of The Game below. Consider it in lieu of a resume and if, after having considered it thoroughly, you still want to talk to me about working this gig for you, you know how to reach me.

1) Capitalism is foundational to the game (as are Communism and Democracy, Religion and Morals...but I digress) and provides the philosophical and moral currency for the accumulation of wealth, fame, fortune and everything that goes with it for the relatively few. Grand accumulation is not the overarching goal for most of us hirelings. At best, hitting it big... seeing one's the ship roll in just in time, saving for a lush retirement, these things remain impossible fantasies of the more naive among us. No, these are *your* objectives, you owners and bankers, controllers and rulers, hedge-fund asswipes and techno-giant hemorrhoids. We are merely the fuel that keeps your ever-running, earth-churning, sky-polluting, water-sucking, life-destroying engines running. And we have not yet found a way to stop ourselves from doing so. Even though we know we have the power to strike the final crippling blow

to your machinations. *May that strike come hard and soon.*

2) Fortunately for you—unfortunately for me—I am forced to sell some part or parts of me: hands, back, mind, vagaga... for sufficient cash to feed, clothe, and shelter me. I also need to pay for the various medicines and treatments that ameliorate just enough of the damage this industrial waste-land has caused, to allow me to get up and do it one more day.

3) You and I do not and cannot have a *fair* and *equitable* relationship; talk about nonsense words. You want to extract as much labor from me as you can while paying me as little as you can get away with (but still feel good about yourself). I, on the other hand, want to work as little as possible for the most amount of money I can squeeze out of your greedy little hands. So, we are at odds from the beginning.

4) You **want** to hire someone with the skills you deem most desirable and profitable: efficiency, speed, accuracy who is respectful, friendly, honest, trustworthy, and most of all reli-able—meaning, comes running when you call. Come hell or high water. In sickness and health, until death do we part. I **need** a job that minimizes my annoyance with the idiots I am most likely working for (and unfortunately, with) and that provides me with the agreed-upon bucks delivered on time, every time. I also want a boss who doesn't jerk me around, who leaves me the hell alone to get to work, get the job done, and get the hell out of their shithole. I know, I ask a lot.

5) No matter how much or how little effort I give to your enterprise, I will not get paid what I am worth. You may be rich but you can't pay the price I would demand if I were so ridiculous as to make demands. There is no amount of money capable of compensating me for the thousands upon thousands of hours I've lost to support the wealthy and their

minions. You can't afford the bill that would cover the physical and mental stress caused by juggling jobs, kids, bills, sickness, homelessness, and looming-too-soon death. You can't pay me enough for the endless time that was far better spent doing absofuckinglutely nothing. Or staring at the sky. Writing a poem. Making love for hours in the middle of the afternoon. Plotting and experimenting with a total revolt on you and your ilk. No price, no amount.

6) No matter how much you try to twist me into your latest version of the perfect employee-machine, I remain my own creation. I am not a team player. I will not be going the extra mile. I am not giving you one hundred and ten percent. I am not your right hand wo/man. I am not the cream of anyone's crop. Whatever brilliance I possess, I use to my own ends, never yours. If you get something out of it, believe me, it's accidental.

7) The Game has no rules. You pretend to believe there are rules; you give lip service to following them. But, we both know it is less than hogwash. We all, every one of us, use or don't use what comes along as we see fit to accomplish our ends. What can I say, except I will continue to rail, fume, and act against your oppressive system of legal theft and mass murder. I know, you and your company "are different," you "care about the people," and you are ever so "green." Blah, blah, blah.

8) Much to my eternal chagrin, despite the simple life I choose to lead, I still need some of that green you hand out so I can get what I can't otherwise make or take. So, as long as I am your wage-slave, I will do the best job that makes sense given what you are willing to pay me, the benefits I'll get (or take), and the effort you make in under-

standing the true state of our relationship. I can assure you, in case you haven't already figured it out, I will be blunter and more direct with you than you are accustomed to. I'll also be slyer because I know how The Game is played. You will be more than satisfied with the quality of my work because I have been thoroughly conditioned to be "the best that I can be" at this point in my 40 plus years of wage-slaving; it would actually take more effort to be sloppy. And I am ALL about keeping my effort to a minimum. It corresponds well with what I'm paid, doncha know.

8) As to trickledown economics...the shit trickling my way from your lofty position can't do anything but roll downhill, collecting deepest at the bottom where my aching feet keep getting stuck. Maybe you don't have it so great either, but I don't feel sorry for you and don't pretend to feel sorry for me. If you want to feel something useful, feel pissed off that this is the best the civilized, "superiorly" intelligent species could come up with: an unfathomably complex socio-political-economic trap designed to give the upitty-ups and true believers a lot of unnecessary death-star-equivalent crap. While the rest just get by and an ever-increasing number starve to death. But don't act pissed to impress me, I'll know when you are faking your indignation—I've seen it all by now, boss.

*Yes, I called you boss! Because you **will** hire me—you won't get a better employee because you'll always know where I stand. Your distrust is as well placed with me as mine is with you. So, let's make a deal—or not. As you might guess, I won't be losing any sleep over whether you or someone else will be my new master for a while. How much sleep do **you** lose in your endless climbing and clamoring for more and more of less and less?*

Why I Don't Care About You: an open letter to my employer

MayMay (2007)

It's lunch time and I'm the only one remaining in the training room. Of course, I'm not training, I'm writing a blog entry. Everyone else went out in a group to Korean food. I like Korean food, so had it not been for the ambivalence about whether or not I want to keep this job I think I would have gone with them. However, this morning when I arrived a fellow employee told me how excited he was to have a new motorcycle, but how annoying it is that the insurance rates are so high. I smiled and nodded, completely uninterested and completely not understanding the finer points of motorcycle insurance rates I think he was trying to explain to me.

That's the problem with this place. I just don't care. I don't care about your motorcycle, just as I don't care about your software. I don't care about your network, your IT projects, your deadlines. I just don't care.

And why should I? No, really, why should I? Don't tell me that I should because it's my job because the question I'm asking you is why should I care about *this* job. You already know I care about doing a good job. Don't tell me I should care because you care, because I don't care about you (same question: why should I?). And don't tell me I should care because caring about it is more than caring about a job, as I know you truly feel (you're missing the point again, I *am* thinking about more than just my job).

Why do you even care the way you do? Don't worry, that's a rhetorical question because I already know the answer. It's the same reason why I cared about my job at Apple; because I felt good about what I was doing. I didn't care about Apple, the company, I cared about the people I was working with (or some of them, anyway), and I cared about making the lives of my customers better. Apple as a company could live or die and I would really not care one way or another, but if that sweet mother didn't get her iPod nano fixed and it made her son sad, I would care. I still care more about that boy's happiness than I do about whether or not we close that several million dollar deal you want to fly me out to that suburb of Seattle to work on.

Do you know why that is? Because I'm not going to see any bit of that million-dollar deal, nor am I going to improve people's lives because of it, regardless of how hard I work.

What's going to happen is that, if we get that deal closed, some sales person who sold that prospect our software gets a relatively minor commission (his incentive, not mine), the customer increases the efficiency of their IT processes (their incentive, not mine) which is just business-speak for making management feel better about laying people off (the customer CEO's incentive, the greedy bastard) and never will my action actually have a benefit for this prospect's customers, who in some altruistic sense I care about in much the same way as that boy and his mother who wanted their iPod fixed.

So why should I work here? Should I keep prosti-tuting my values and my sense of fulfillment just to

satisfy my curiosity with high technology? Obviously not, though that's what I've been doing since I realized I was unhappy here. You don't want me to do that because it makes me a bad employee, unable to be optimally effective. I don't want it because it's making me miserable and makes me feel like I'm wasting a huge part of my life.

It would have been easier if I got more of the perks I was expecting (more training and learning opportunities, more personal time, follow-through on promises like having a day off to make up for the holiday I worked, working with people I like, and so on), but seeing as how these don't seem to be happening I see no reason not to accelerate my alternative plans (of which I have plenty).

So unless you see a possibility for this to change, it's not a matter of if I'm going to quit but when, and the countdown to a decision ends this Friday at noon.

I Quit, Because Capitalism

MayMay (2013)

On "quotes," "estimates," and other bullshit
When I started the project with Gender Spectrum, I was
asked for a quote. Here's the thing: I don't give quotes.
Every quote you ever get from a developer is going to be
straight-up bullshit, just some number they pulled out of
their ass. Especially when you're a freelancer, you have to
get really good at pulling bullshit out of your ass.

Quotes and estimates are bullshit because nobody
knows what's going to come up out of the code. This is
doubly true for "nightmare" projects where the premise
of the work is "things are fucked up and we don't know
what's wrong or how to fix it!" At that point, any reason-
able estimates would be so broad as to be meaningless in
the first place.

Since I wouldn't give a quote, or a project estimate,
I was asked to track my hours. Here's the thing: I don't
track my hours, either. I don't track my hours because I
don't work in hour, or even in minute, chunks. I do
multiple things simultaneously. As any person who
performs creative tasks like writing or painting or even
having sex with a lover or with oneself will tell you,
"hours" are a meaningless unit of measurement for such
things. Do I charge for the hour where I took a walk and
thought about the structure of the project's codebase?
How about the half hour I spent reading the internation-
alization and localization API of the system's software?

Tracking hours is a distraction from actually doing

the work. Tracking hours is additional hours of (busy) work. Tracking hours is an interruption. Charging "hourly" consistently makes the project longer, makes my work less good, and annoys the fuck out of me.

So when I was asked for a quote, I countered: *One thing I want from this project is a car. Don't pay me anything other than a car, if you have to think of it as paying me something in the first place. If you agree to help me get a car, that'll help me fix your website.*

Asking for help getting a car instead of asking for money for working on the website seemed like an obvious win for everybody. It was quite literally the best possible deal. I didn't even want a fancy car. A hardy Honda Civic or trusty Toyota Camry would be fine for me. A couple thousand dollars, tops, plus help taking care of the bureaucratic red-tape of insurance and registration.

The whole thing would've cost Gender Spectrum a few thousand dollars, including the stipend for whatever intern was assigned to help me out. In contrast, tracking my hours for the project at $125 per hour (my standard going rate, which is highly competitive with the $120 per hour their previous freelance developer charged them) would've easily put them over the $6,000 mark within the first two weeks of my employment.

Emma thought the car thing was a good idea, too. But the idea didn't go over so well with her boss at Gender Spectrum. Her boss wanted to have a meeting with me, some vagueness about making sure I could "commit" to the project, and in the meantime Emma convinced me to just charge under an hourly rate agreement, which we both knew would net me more

than enough money to buy a car. Using that money, I could then hire her to help me do the stressful logistics pieces for figuring out how to actually get this car.

This seemed like a good idea, with one major problem. The whole point of having a car was so that I would have enough stability and time to *do the project* in the first place. Remember how I'm sleeping under overpasses and on generous people's couches? That actually takes a lot of time to make possible.

Every day, I spend anywhere between two and five hours setting up different couchsurfing arrangements, orienting myself in physical space with different travel options, learning public transit routes or just fucking walking with my pack on the streets of whatever city I happen to be in. Not to mention the emotional and social energy it takes for an introvert like me to interact with the people who generously host me. After a few weeks of hopping from one person's couch to another, sometimes all I want to do is curl up in a corner and not talk to anybody ever again. None of these are situations in which I can sit down and focus on writing code.

Having a car would mean a helluva lot more freedom to plop my ass down at a coffeeshop and just hack on some code. Having to work for money to get a car was a Catch-22. However, as circumstances had it, I lucked out and found myself with an opportunity to have a stable housing situation for the month of May, exactly when the Gender Spectrum project was due to spin up. So, I agreed to the hour-tracking fiasco.

I arrived at my stable housing situation. May 1st

came and went. I began tracking hours. Within a week, I'd racked up an invoice for Gender Spectrum in the $3,000 range. And that's when we needed to "have a meeting." Another week came and went. We didn't have a meeting because the boss was busy. And what was the meeting about anyway? The answer I got was more vagueness about being sure I could "commit" to the project.

This delay was a problem, because time was a factor, because I didn't yet have a car. Throughout this delay, I made clear to Emma that I don't "commit" to stuff. It's ridiculous and insulting to be asked to "commit" to work if you know that it's just as much a mirage to commit to work as it is to commit to paying for work. It's all just a fucking agreement. Asking me to commit to work is no different than me asking you to commit to paying for the work. Haven't we already worked that out?

So being asked whether or not I'd commit to a project I was already actively working on raised, in me, the following question: are you going to pay me for working on a project you already said you'd hire me to do?

This should be fucking obvious, but since it isn't to capitalists, which is most people I've ever had the displeasure of interacting with, I apparently have to repeat it: agreements don't mean shit without trust. Nothing, not even your punitive legal system of contract law, can give an agreement value without trust. You can strong-arm people into doing what you want if you have enough power over their environment to get them to servilely accept whatever increasingly shitty circumstances you're

putting them in, but that's not trust, and it's not an agreement. There is no such thing as freedom of choice in a "free market" where the only choices are employment or starvation. That's not a choice, that's a threat.

I don't take well to being threatened, and that's not some kind of moral fucking failing on my part. And being threatened was exactly what was happening. All the vagueness about "committing" to a project was certainly not reassuring, and I've been around the block enough to understand when business-speak is a facade on a fundamentally untrustworthy relationship.

Sure enough, that's exactly what happened in our meeting, which we finally held in mid-May. Long before we spoke, I had communicated to Emma, who had told me she'd communicated to her boss, that I don't commit indefinitely to future work. We had already drafted a Scope of Work, another one of those business-y documents, useful for clarifying what work needs to be done but terribly inane when treated like a contract. I had already delivered a few of the line items and I had no intention of asking Gender Spectrum to pay me any monies until the scope of work was completed in full.

So why were we having this meeting? Lisa, the Gender Spectrum executive director, spoke to me about how she didn't want high developer turnover. Everything she said to me made clear she didn't know what the fuck she was talking about from a technology perspective. This is no surprise, of course, coming from someone whose other full-time job is the VP of Marketing at Genedata AG, Inc.

Fucking marketing professionals. Do humanity a favor and kill yourselves.

I tried to make it clear that developer turnover is a problem when you have shit developers who do crappy work that they don't document or tell anyone about. It's actually not a problem when you take knowledge transfer into account and actually include documentation as part of the scope of work—which we did. I thought the whole point of being hired was to empower them, not to make them dependant on me. I was beginning to deliver something that made developer turnover irrelevant. But if they didn't trust me to do that, having a meeting about my feelings about commitments was, itself, irrelevant.

The meeting lasted an hour. I tried to reiterate my complete and total unwillingness to commit to any relationship with Gender Spectrum beyond the Scope of Work already laid out. It fell on deaf ears. Over and over again, I'd say something like, "I won't be able to guarantee any work outside of the Scope of Work," or "I'm not in a position where I can actually commit to working past the agreements I've already confirmed with Emma," but nothing seemed to get through that thick marketer's skull of hers.

An hour into the meeting, we were finally starting to wind down. Then I hear Lisa say, again, "Well, it sounds like, MayMay, you need to think about it and tell us if you can commit to working with us for longer."

And I just lost it.

"Lisa, I'm going to need to interject something here. Listen, I've been very clear with Emma for weeks and I've

been very clear in this phone call that I'm not going to commit to an indefinite project with Gender Spectrum. There is nothing more I need to think about here. As I've been saying, I know exactly where I stand. We've been talking about this in circles for an hour. I have other things I need to do with my day. Unless there's anything else someone on this call wants to tell me, I'm going to go."

There was a short silence. "No, I think that's everything," I heard Emma say. "Lisa?"

"No, nothing else." Lisa said.

"Great. Lisa, it was very nice to meet you," I lied through my teeth. "Have a good day." I hung up.

A couple days went by with no word from Gender Spectrum. By now, the end of the month I'd set aside specifically to work on tech projects was fast approaching. I was sick and tired of waiting on Gender Spectrum, so I got involved with the re-launch of the "I Am Bradley Manning" photo petition website I'd helped launch two years ago. You might have seen a news cycle about the celebrity Public Service Announcement video we made. You might have surfed on over to iam.BradleyManning. org when you saw it linked on your Facebook or Twitter. Well, now you know, I helped make that.

I didn't work on it for money. I worked on it because I wanted to.

A couple days after the phone meeting, Emma told me Lisa thought the meeting was "kind of refreshing." It was too late, though. Every single time Emma pinged me about Gender Spectrum over chat, we'd end up getting into a fight about it, or the project, or the meeting, or how little time I had left in the month to focus on code.

I told her I'd gotten involved with the Bradley Manning Support Network's new social media project.

Hey, it was a techie project, and I had specifically set myself up with time to code this month, so I thought I should use that time to code this month. I told her I'd still do Gender Spectrum stuff but that I'd only do it until the end of May, and I'd only give it fifty percent of my attention, tops.

Emma said that was fine. She also said Lisa tentatively agreed to a pared-down Scope of Work, but would hire someone else after the fact, and didn't want me to continue to work with them afterwards.

There was no longer any reason I should work specifically with the Gender Spectrum people, and therefore there was no reason I should work *for* them, either. Gender Spectrum showed themselves to be exactly the sort of people I don't like and can't communicate with. Any agreement I made with them would've been meaningless because I don't want to work with people like that.

The whole fucking point of refusing to sign contracts or make meaningless commitments is to avoid getting tied to some commitment I wasn't going to keep. Agreeing to such things only constrains me, not them. I charge for work done, not work I will do. And I won't commit to work I will do. I do work I want to do, and if I get additional benefits like financial compensation out of that, all's the better for me.

The emotional and personal cost of interacting with this stupid system was high, and the "payoff" was nonexistent.

What Lisa actually wanted out of our meeting was some kind of proof that I'm a trustworthy person to work with, but that's not how trust works. You don't make friends by passively-aggressively making people promise to be your friend. And yet that's what employer/employee relationships are all about: coercively making people pretend to be friends, under the threat of starvation due to losing access to money. Bosses like to do this thing where they pretend that they're not really your boss, just your friend and colleague with a different position in the company than you have.

Fuck that shit.

The best bosses I've ever had knew that they were my boss and didn't try to sweep under the rug the fact of that as a non-consensual power relationship. I'm privileged enough to be able to lead a lifestyle that means I don't have to do employer/employee relationships anymore—I hate having relationships where I voluntarily give up my agency for the sole purpose of getting taken advantage of—and I'm smart enough to usually figure out when I'm being asked to have one of those.

Money is a technology that destroys trust. Its entire purpose is to short-circuit human relationships in order to insert itself as a middleman. It makes everybody spend more money, at more emotional cost, for things that make them angry at each other. I love Emma. But every conversation we had turned into a fight. I am not exaggerating when I say that's capitalism's fault.

So, after the meeting, I quit.

Not immediately, although I should have. And after Emma and I talked about it over chat, we realized that I

should have quit the instant Lisa rejected my initial offer for helping me get a car as a way to collaborate on helping fix Gender Spectrum's website. I have this blind spot because I love Emma, so I believe she won't hurt me. She wants to protect me. But because I'm a human, I'm irrational, and thus I somehow believed getting involved in an abusive relationship with capitalism was going to be fine just because Emma didn't want to hurt me.

In hindsight, it's obvious that was a stupid mistake, because Emma and I had put ourselves into a situation in which she was effectively forced to try and hurt me, because it's her job, and if she didn't do her job, she couldn't keep paying rent.

Here's the thing. Capitalism doesn't just harm people by bludgeoning us with money. It harms us by getting us to bludgeon each other and ourselves with money.

Epilogue

When I did finally communicate to Gender Spectrum that I'd quit, I did so by sending Lisa the following resignation letter.

Lisa,

Effective immediately, I will no longer be working on Gender Spectrum projects.

The work I have completed to date for Gender Spectrum includes fixing various bugs, removing obstacles to maintenance and future updates, and creating a development environment for Gender Spectrum to use in future development tasks. I tracked a

total of 26.25 hours on this work. My hourly rate is $125.00 per hour.

You can choose whether or not to compensate me for my work. If you choose to compensate me for all or part of my work, make a cheque in the amount of your choosing payable to Meitar Moscovitz and send it addressed to me at:

> \> [ADDRESS REDACTED]

Sincerely,
Meitar Moscovitz
Personal: http://maymay.net
Professional: http://MeitarMoscovitz.com

I know this sounds like an awkward resignation letter, but I actually spent almost a week carefully composing it. I didn't want it to sound like an invoice, not because I think charging money for one's time or labor is some unforgivable sin no one should ever do, but because doing that is *unhealthy for me.* Capitalism isn't just bad in some objective sense of the word, it's concretely harmful to the human life I care most about: mine.

Also, while drafting this piece, I got another email from a recruiter. I realized I'll just keep getting emails from recruiters, and capitalism will still be there, like an abusive ex-partner, constantly trying to seduce me into bed with it again. For my own health and safety, I need some way to actively shield myself from getting job offers.

So, I'm starting a long-overdue revamp to my LinkedIn profile, which is where I assume these devil-spawn come from. Under the heading titled "Advice for contacting [user name]:," I've written

DO:
1. Have an interesting project. Make it ambitious. Ambitions are interesting. Everything else is boring.
2. Treat me like a friend and collaborator (not an employee or a magical creature who can talk to computers).

DON'T:
1. Offer to pay me. Seriously. If you offer me money, I will decline on principle.
2. Be a recruiter. First, I don't answer recruiters. Second, I don't want the job.
3. Support capitalism. I am an avowed anti-capitalist. Yes, really. If your project so much as pretends to have a capitalistic agenda, I will tell you to go fuck yourself and your project.

This is just a quick edit, and I eventually want to change the rest of my tech professional web presence to match that sentiment. Thing is, I'll always be excited about working on all kinds of cool projects. But I absolutely hate money, everything to do with it, and everything it stands for.

Putting Work on Ice

Arlee Fox (2016)

In practice, the National Science Foundation and their contractor consider everything under their management to be a Workplace. This will become clear during room inspections. Concerning minor injuries, some people 'just pop into Medical' to 'ask a quick question' or to 'just grab an ice pack'. Many others do not do this.

—Nicholas Johnson, *Big Dead Place*

. . .

The first time I wintered over in Antarctica, I shared a bathroom with the physical therapist. I knew she was sleeping with the station manager because I walked in on him one morning taking a shit. I was a janitor, so shit was my job, and I was personally acquainted with every asshole on station who produced it.

The toughest thing about living and working in Antarctica isn't the cold, or the dark, or being seven time zones away from your kids. It's that you're always at the bar with your boss. When you live at your job, there is no off-the-clock. There is no going home at the end of the day. There is no going home at all.

McMurdo Station, Antarctica exists to provide logistics support for scientific research near the South Pole. More cynical folks claim the "research mission" is a ruse, that America is simply squatting on oil-rich terrain, waiting for environmental treaties to expire.

Whatever its reason for being, McMurdo is a company town, administrated by the NSF and run by a

series of government sub-contractors: Raytheon Polar, Lockheed Martin, PAE. It has two bars (one smoking, one non), a makeshift coffeehouse, a commissary-type store where you can buy t-shirts and shampoo, a tiny surreal little library tucked away like a dream, an even tinier gym, and you are not allowed to set foot on station except as an employee of the United States Antarctic Program.

In 2000, two ambitious Norwegians skiied unsupported over 3000km to McMurdo from Norway's Troll Base. That's about the distance from Pittsburgh to Mexico City. When they arrived, their representatives back home had not filed the appropriate paperwork, so they had to sleep outside in a tent. USAP employees were forbidden to talk to them.

McMurdo houses just under 1000 people during the summer season. This population is made up mostly of plumbers, mechanics, carpenters, cooks, computer techs, dishwashers, and other laborers and tradespeople who keep the station running. There are some upper-management types sent down from the contractor's main office in Denver, some full-time laboratory staff, and the scientists, who flit in and out like exotic birds pursuant to the terms of their grants. Over winter, this population drops to a skeleton crew of roughly 250, no scientists.

Accommodations on station are dorm-style, meals are eaten in a shared cafeteria, and most shifts are 7am to 5pm Monday through Saturday, plus rotating 12-hour shifts to offload the yearly resupply vessel, plus whenever else you're needed to work: mandatory volunteer stints in the galley, community cleaning chores, special events, etc. If that's not

enough for you, you can also pick up a "recreational job" like tending bar or signing out cross-country skis.

There's a difference between doing work and being employed. To work is to expend effort and create some object or outcome of value. Being employed means selling your time to a boss who then tells you what to do with it: sometimes that's work; sometimes, it's sit around, kill time, look busy, go to meetings, cover your boss's ass, watch safety videos, and fill out paperwork.

One thing that's so addicting about the Antarctic experience—bringing people back again and again, despite the cold, the dark, and the time zones—is that the work is hard and purposeful.

On the Ice, everyone knows everyone and knows exactly what they do and why it matters. I had always defined my worth by my intelligence, but in McMurdo my fancy Philosophy degree didn't count for much. Was I a hard worker, low-maintenance, and fun to drink with? That's what people cared about, what made me valuable to the community.

Antarcticans are hard workers and dreamers both. Almost everyone who comes to the Ice is drawn by the tall tales of people gone before them. They leave behind jobs and families and fresh food and sun to chase some strange inspiration to the bottom of the globe. They tend to be misfits, iconoclasts, weirdos, and wanderers, the type of people who Antarctic author Nick Johnson describes as "willing to be flown into the stark wilderness to test [their] mettle against whatever nature throws [their] way" but who would normally never be caught dead working for a corporation Raytheon or Lockheed Martin.

But that's how you get to the Antarctica, so they do it.

As a polar janitor, I got more appreciative smiles, thank you notes taped to bathroom mirrors, Christmas gifts, and considerate questions about trash sorting than any real world custodian ever has. One mechanic I knew would sit in the smoking bar and buy drinks for any cook who walked in the door. "Is he hitting on me?" they would usually ask the first time. "No," the recreational bartender would assure them, "He's just saying thanks 'cause you're why he can eat." Working was how we took care of each other. It was how we kept each other alive.

The job, however, is something else. The job is always being "on the job," even when you're not on shift. It's every sleepless night, illicit affair, bad night at the bar, or snarky email to friends being reflected in your performance review. The job is being poked, prodded, vaccinated, physically and psychologically examined, tested, bled, and otherwise assessed as an insurance risk for the company. It's being forced to take a pregnancy test before Medical can treat you for so much as headache, just in case—because if you're pregnant, you're fired.

The job is a faceless megacorporation owning your body and all of your time. When the thing you're selling is not just your labor but your every waking and sleeping breath, it's hard to come up with a number that feels like fair recompense. The company comes up with one for you: $377 a week. There is no such thing as overtime pay. OSHA does not apply in Antarctica.

HR and IT are tasked with surveillance, but you hardly need snitches in a town so small there's no space

to do anything privately. Some couples are notorious for finding places to have sex—janitor's closets, storm shelter huts, vehicle cabs, the Chapel—but they have to be very creative. Meanwhile, every time you log onto a computer in the McMurdo Internet Kiosk, you are reminded that all machines are government machines, that all network equipment is government network equipment, that any data sent over the government's satellite uplink, even from a personal laptop, belongs to the government and is subject to NSF review.

So, you become very careful about what you write to people back home. Self-censorship begins to feel oddly voluntary. After all, you'll be reminded again and again, you are very lucky to be in Antarctica. You get extremely conscious of time, tracking all of your movements in a little green notebook, transferring them to the department spreadsheet at the end of each day. None of this is about doing your work—cooking food, shoveling snow, making sure the heat stays on.

This is about keeping your job.

So, you adapt. You learn how to criticize the company quietly and in code. You become adept at slipping around inane regulations and underneath reporting requirements that prevent you from getting work done. When you have a headache, or you hurt yourself on the job, you don't go to Medical. There's a kind of playful insurrectionism between the staff and lower-management—at least the more clued-in managers who came up through the ranks themselves—that lets frustrated workers blow off steam. Denver occasionally steps in and fires someone at random to make sure all these hippies still

know who's boss.

One year, it was a guy who threw an unauthorized jello wrestling party in a warehouse. Another time, a couple of janitors got caught watching TV on their break. Fired. Gone on the next plane. Bye. You laugh about how you wouldn't even know what to do with a two day weekend. When you get one, for Christmas or Midwinter, what you do with it is drink. That's what you do with your one-day weekends, too.

Life in McMurdo taught me how it feels to spread a paycheck out across every minute of my life. It feels thin. My life only has so many minutes in it, and there is no dollar amount I can be paid for them that doesn't seem like a raw deal. However, money is a necessity for survival on every continent, and sometimes that means getting a job. People take jobs for all kinds of reasons. It's not always for money; sometimes it's for health insurance, a place in a community, access to lab equipment, an identity, an education, an adventure. Sometimes you sign on with a giant weapons manufacturer because that's how you get to Antarctica.

Employment, however, is not synonymous with working. Work is the shit you do that matters to you and to the survival of the people you care about. It's whatever you would strive to accomplish if you had all the time in the world. You can get paid to work but, when you have a job, you mostly get paid not to.

When I left the Antarctic Program—burnt-out, mentally toasty, physically injured, and nearly 30— and stumbled back into real life, I had a pretty severe existential crisis. In the world, I had nobody telling me where

to be. I didn't know who I was or what I was for, much less how to find an apartment on Craigslist. It took me several years to recover and to re-discover a daily routine that felt meaningful to me. But I did know some things: I knew how to ride the emotional rollercoaster of government bureaucracy, a useful skill for counseling unemployed friends and getting myself food stamps. I had learned the hard way not to sleep with my co-workers.

And I could tell the difference between working and having a job. I've tried to avoid having a job ever since; there's just too much work to be done.

Should We Have A Right To Not Work?

John Danaher (2014)

Voltaire once said that "work saves a man from three great evils: boredom, vice, and need."

Many people endorse this sentiment. Indeed, the ability to seek and secure paid employment is often viewed as an essential part of a well-lived life. Those who do not work are reminded of the fact. They are said to be missing out on a valuable and fulfilling human experience. The sentiment is so pervasive that some of the foundational documents of international human rights law—including the UN Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR Art. 23) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR Art. 6)—recognise and enshrine the "right to work."

But what about the right not to work?

Although the UDHR and ICESCR both recognise the right to rest and leisure, they do so clearly in the context of a concern about overwork. In other words, they recognise the right to work *under fair and reasonable conditions.* They do not take the more radical step of recognising a right to opt out of work completely, nor to have that right protected by the state. But maybe they should? Maybe the right to not work is something that a just and humane society should recognise?

That, at any rate, is the argument developed by Andrew Levine in his article "Fairness to Idleness: Is there a right not to work?" In this post, I want to take a look at

that argument. In broad outline, Levine defends the claim that a right not to work is entailed by the fundamental principles of liberal egalitarianism (of a roughly Rawlsian type). He does so, not because he himself endorses liberal egalitarianism, but because he wishes to highlight the more radical implications of that view.

I think Levine's argument is intriguing. I also think that if we are entering an age of increasing automation and technological unemployment—i.e. a world in which economically productive activity will be taken over by machines—the alleged impracticalities of the argument will become less and less of an issue. Consequently, it is something we should start to take more seriously. I'll break my discussion down into two main sections. First, I sketch Levine's argument for the right not to work. Second, I consider his response to the major criticisms of that argument.

Levine's Argument for a Right not to Work

One of the central precepts of liberal egalitarianism, as Levine understands it, is the principle of neutrality. According to this principle, the state should be neutral with respect to its citizens' conception of the good. That is to say, the state should not promote any particular conception of what the good life consists of. Instead, it should work to tolerate and facilitate people's pursuits of different conceptions of the good. Obviously, it can only do this to a certain extent.

If a person's conception of the good consists in the belief that, say, all black people should be killed, then that can neither be facilitated nor tolerated. Or if a person's

conception of the good involves unreasonable demands on resources, such that it would deprive many others of their conception of the good, then it may not be permissible or possible to facilitate it. But assuming that a person's conception of the good does not unjustly or unfairly deprive anyone else of their conception of the good, it should be tolerated, and if possible, facilitated.

This principle of neutrality provides the basis for Levine's argument for the right not to work. Although he does not offer a formal summary of that argument, I think we can craft a formal version by reading between the lines.

Here is my stab at it:

1. *If the state is committed to the liberal egalitarian model of justice, then it should tolerate and facilitate any individual citizen's conception of the good, provided that that conception of the good does not unjustly or unfairly deprive anyone else of their conception of the good.*
2. *There is a conception of the good in which a person refuses to work and instead pursues a life of leisure.*
3. *This conception of the good does not unjustly and unfairly deprive anyone else of their conception of the good.*
4. *Therefore, the liberal egalitarian state should tolerate and facilitate the refusal of work and the pursuit of leisure (i.e. it should recognise a right not to work).*

Premise 1 is the normative principle. As you can see, it is conditional in nature. It assumes that we first accept the liberal egalitarian model. This is a model many would challenge, but we are assuming it *arguendo* (for the sake of argument). This is because that is the argumentative

strategy adopted by Levine. Some may also dispute the claim that liberal egalitarianism entails the restricted form of neutrality that I have outlined in the second half of premise 1.

Indeed, as we shall see, Levine himself disputes it, thinking in particular that the "unfairness" condition may be overstated. This means we may have to modify premise 1, but we'll only do that once we confront the relevant objection to the argument.

Premise 2 makes what I think is a relatively uncontroversial point, namely that a life of leisure is a possible model of the good life. Since most people accept that leisure is a good, I think they might be willing to accept this claim. Admittedly, a lot more would need to be said to fully defend it. In particular, the concept of "leisure" would need to be unpacked in more detail.

The only thing I would say here is that, for me, the concept of a "life of leisure" is not used to denote a life of senseless pleasure-seeking. Rather, it is used to denote a life that is not *economically* productive or consumptive. Thus, a life of leisure could consist in producing things with no economic value (like blog posts!).

Furthermore, I would add that premise 2 is consistent with the view that a life of leisure is "less than ideal" or "sub-optimal." In other words, it only claims that it is *a* conception of the good; not that it is the best one.

Premise 3 is probably the most important one. It makes the key claim that the pursuit of a life of leisure does not unjustly or unfairly interfere with anyone else's conception of the good. It is this claim that allows us to reach the conclusion that there could be a right not to

work. Without it, the argument crumbles. There are several obvious rejoinders to premise 3.

Some people might be inclined to view leisure as an *expensive taste*, one that the state is under no obligation to facilitate. To give an example: sailing around the world on a fully-staffed, multi-million dollar yacht, may well feature in some people's conception of the good life (I believe I have met such people). But I doubt anyone would say that the state is obliged to facilitate that conception of the good life. If that's the way you want to live, you'll have to work and earn the money needed to fund that expensive taste. That's usually the way we look on all expensive tastes. But isn't leisure time the same thing? Isn't it just expensive taste that we need to work hard to earn?

Levine argues that this is the wrong way to look at the life of leisure. He argues that looking on leisure as a consumption-good—*i.e.* that can bought and paid for, and substituted for other goods—misses the point in at least two ways. First, it adopts a perspective on leisure that is a function of our capitalistic, commodification-prone society. Second, it ignores the fact that working hard in order to obtain leisure undermines the very nature of that good.

Instead, Levine argues that we should view leisure as an intrinsic, non-substitutable good: something that can't simply be purchased in return for a fee. To defend this claim, Levine adopts a rather ingenious strategy: he draws an analogy between the typical arguments for the right to work and the argument he wants to make for the right to leisure.

I'll quote from him here:

To make the case that the state ought to accord [a right to work]… one would have to show that, for some individuals, the benefits of employment are such that nothing can adequately substitute for them. Presumably the benefits would be non-pecuniary, since direct grants can always substitute for wages…thus it is almost certainly relevant to any likely defense of a right to work that individuals generally cannot purchase jobs through markets…it is also relevant that social norms are such that participation in the monetized economy is, for most people, a basis for self-respect and the respect of others.

In much the same way, it is fair to view leisure as an intrinsic, non-substitutable component of particular conceptions of the good. The rationale is the same: like employment in the monetized economy, idleness can sometimes be so connected to individuals' self-understandings, to their relations with others, and indeed to their very identities that trading off leisure for a wage can only be to the detriment of what matters fundamentally [to them]. (Levine, 2013, 106–107)

As I say, I think this is ingenious. This is mainly because I think Levine is correct about the right to work. If people believe that work is so important that it must be facilitated and protected by the state, it must be because they think the goods associated with it cannot simply be bought and sold on a market. But if this is correct then why not look on leisure as being the same thing (for at least some people)?

The problem, of course, is that many will think that facilitating leisure will be unfair and unjust in other ways. Let's consider this type of objection in more depth.

Reciprocity and the Unfairness of Non-workers
The view that non-workers are no-good free-loaders, whose lifestyles are funded off the hard-graft of others, is a persistent one. There is good cause for it. The idle leisure-seeking classes of the past and present are typically wealthy landowners or capitalists who fund their extravagant lifestyles from rents they earn from the productive work of others. Surely we cannot wish to protect and facilitate their right to do this?

Embedded in this rhetorical question are two related objections to the right to not to work. The first, and more straightforward, is the objection that the state couldn't really sustain this sort of lifestyle choice. If everybody pursued the life of leisure, there would be nobody left to fund it. The second, and more ethically complex objection, is that even if some people did get to pursue this lifestyle, they could only do so by unjustly or unfairly exploiting others.

As I say, the first objection is the more straightforward one. We can respond to it in a couple of ways. One is by acknowledging that if everyone chose that lifestyle it would, indeed, be unsustainable but then suggesting that this is unlikely. This is Levine's response. He thinks the work ethic is so dominant in our societies that it is highly unlikely that a sufficient number of people will drop out of work.

Another response, which I hinted at in the introduction, is to suggest that automation and technological unemployment will either (a) allow for many more people to drop out of work or (b) force many people out

of work. Consequently, a life of leisure will become feasible (if not compulsory) for more and more people. Of course, technological unemployment on a large scale could create huge inequalities of wealth, and these would need to be addressed, but that wouldn't defeat the point I am making: that technological unemployment will bring us closer to a world in which a life of leisure is increasingly the norm.

The second objection is the more ethically contentious one. It derives its logic from classic "public goods" problems like the tragedy of the commons. Societies have a number of coordination problems to solve. Oftentimes, the solution requires some form of cooperation: if everyone (or a sufficient fraction thereof) pitches in, a cooperative gain will be realised. If they do not, the cooperative gain will be lost. The belief is that the gains from economic growth are much like this. Unless a sufficient number of people pitch in (either by supplying capital or labour), those cooperative gains will be lost.

Furthermore, the belief is that the shares of those cooperative gains should, in a just and fair society, be proportionate in nature. That is to say, your share of the cooperative gain should be proportionate to the amount of effort you put into realising it. If your share is greater than your contribution, you are unjustly and unfairly profiting from the contribution of others.

The objection to non-work is, simply, if society tolerated and facilitated this lifestyle, it would presumably have to be through some form of redistribution that allowed the leisure-seekers to meet their basic needs without working. That would mean they would

receive a share of economic gains that was not proportionate to their contribution. Hence it would mean that they were unjustly and unfairly depriving others of what they were due.

Interestingly, Levine accepts this criticism (this is where the modification of premise 1 comes into play). He accepts that the life of leisure would involve some degree of unfair gain (though how great is a separate issue). He just doesn't think this is a normative problem. Why not? Because cooperative gains are rarely, if ever, shared in accordance with contribution. It is usually very difficult to work out what the contributions really are, and often times impractical or undesirable to distribute in accordance with those contributions.

For example, the state provides (or heavily regulates the provision of) public goods that cannot be easily supplied by the market. (A classic example is healthcare.) When it does so, the benefits of that good are rarely equally shared among the population. But we usually do not fret greatly about this. For example, I contribute far more to the public healthcare in my country than I take out of it, but I don't find this to be terribly unfair to me. Other people need those resources more than I do.

Is there something different about work and non-work? Should a lack of contribution to economic productivity be treated differently? Levine argues that, in principle it shouldn't, but there is a good historical reason as to why it is perceived differently. Material scarcity was, and still is, a fact of life for many human societies.

For example, hunter-gatherer tribes living off the land couldn't afford group members who didn't do their

fair share (certainly not for long). Otherwise, they would all starve. This probably encouraged our ancestors to resent the idle. Levine suggests that this resentment may now be deeply ingrained in our psyches. It could be what makes the life of leisure seem so self-indulgent and unfair.

But the historical rationale for this resentment may no longer be present. We now live in pretty affluent societies, which often overproduce essential goods like food and housing. There are still material scarcities, of course, but they are largely due to failures to equitably distribute the abundance. This increasing affluence—particularly if it can be achieved through machine rather than human labour—reduces the need for everyone to do the same amount of work.

As Levine puts it:

> … *it is no longer a reasonable functional adaptation to real world conditions to demand that everyone do their "fair share" in the face of scarcity. Increasing affluence diminishes, without extinguishing, the moral urgency of reciprocity. At the same time, it enhances the importance of doing what it required to implement genuine neutrality.* (Levine, 2013, 111)

In other words, as we become better and better at meeting our material needs without human labour, it becomes more and more important to ensure that our society meets the other requirements of justice, which in this case means recognising, respecting, and facilitating the right to not work.

Conclusion

That brings us to the end of Levine's argument.

To briefly recap, Levine argues that the principle of

liberal neutrality implies a right not to work. This is because leisure is an intrinsic, non-substitutable good that can feature in a person's conception of the good life. If the neutral state ought to tolerate and facilitate its citizens' pursuit of the good, then it ought to tolerate and facilitate the rejection of work.

Levine defends this argument from charges of impracticality and injustice. He does so primarily on the grounds that increasing affluence and abundance negates the need for everyone to participate equally. I have suggested that this argument can be strengthened by considering the possible impact of automation and technological unemployment.

Does Work Undermine Our Freedom?

John Danaher (2015)

Work is a dominant feature of contemporary life. Most of us spend most of our time working, or, if not actually working, then preparing for, recovering from, and commuting to work. Work is the focal point, something around which all else is organised. We either work to live, or live to work.

I am fortunate in that I generally enjoy my work. I get paid to read, write, and teach for a living. I can't imagine doing anything else. But others are less fortunate. For them, work is drudgery, a necessary means to a more desirable end. They would prefer not to work, or to spend much less time doing so. But they don't have that option. Society, law, and economic necessity all conspire to make work a near-essential requirement. Would it be better if this were not the case?

In recent months, I have explored a number of affirmative answers to this question. Back in July 2014, I looked at Joe Levine's argument for the right not to work. This argument rested on a particular reading of the requirements of Rawlsian egalitarianism. In brief, Levine felt that Rawlsian neutrality with respect to an individual's conception of the good life required some recognition of a right to opt out of paid labour.

Then, in October 2014, I offered my own general overview of the anti-work literature, dividing the arguments up into two categories: intrinsic badness argu-

ments (which claimed that there was something intrinsically bad about work) and opportunity cost arguments (which claimed that even if work were okay, non-work was better).

In this post, I want to explore one more anti-work argument. This one comes from an article by Julia Maskivker entitled "Employment as a Limitation on Self-Ownership." Although this argument retreads some of the territory covered in previous posts, I think it also offers some novel insights, and I want to go over them. First, I offer a brief overview of Maskivker's central anti-work argument. As we'll see, this argument has two contentious premises, each based on three claims about freedom and justice. I then spend the next three sections looking at Maskivker's defence of those three claims. I will then focus on some criticisms of her argument, before concluding with a general review.

Maskivker's Anti-Work Argument
I'll actually start with a mild criticism. Although I see much of value in Maskivker's article, and although I learned a lot from it, I can't honestly say that I enjoyed reading it. Large parts of it felt disorganised, needlessly convoluted, and occasionally repetitious. Although she introduced a central normative claim early on—viz. a claim about the need for *effective control self-ownership*—later parts of her argument seemed to stray from the strict requirements of that concept. This left me somewhat confused as to what her central argument really was. So what follows is very much my own interpretation of things and should be read with that caveat in mind.

Anyway, let's start by clarifying what it is we are arguing against.

In the past, I have lamented the fact that definitions of work are highly problematic. They are often value-laden, and prone to the sins of under- and over-inclusiveness. I'm not sure that there can ever be a perfect definition of work, one that precisely captures all the phenomena of interest to those making the anti-work critique. Nevertheless, we need something more concrete, and Maskivker provides.

She defines work as paid labour. That is, labour that is undertaken for the purposes of remuneration. This definition is simple and covers what is central to her own argument. My only complaint is that it may need to be expanded to cover forms of labour that are not directly remunerated but are undertaken in the hope of eventually being remunerated (e.g. the work of entrepreneurs in the early stages of a business, or the work of unpaid interns). But this is just a quibble.

With that definition in place, we can proceed to Maskivker's anti-work argument itself. That argument is all about the effect of work to undermine freedom. Although this argument is initially framed in terms of a particular conception of freedom as effective control self-ownership, I believe it ends up appealing to a much broader and more ecumenical understanding of freedom. As follows,

1. *If a phenomenon undermines our freedom, then it is fundamentally unjust and we should seek to minimise or constrain it.*
2. *A phenomenon undermines our freedom if: (a) it limits our ability to choose how to make use of our time; (b) it limits our*

*ability to be the authors of our own lives; and/or (c) it
involves exploitative/coercive offers.*

3. *Work, in modern society, (a) limits our ability to choose how
   to make use of our time; (b) limits our ability to be the
   authors of our own lives; and c) involves an exploitative/
   coercive offer.*
4. *Therefore, work undermines our freedom.*
5. *Therefore, work is fundamentally unjust and should be
   minimised or constrained.*

You could alter this, as Maskivker seems to wish to do, by
turning it into an argument for a right not to work.
Though I will discuss this general idea later on, I'm
avoiding that construal of the argument for the simple
reason that it requires additional explanation. Specifically,
it requires some explanation of what it would mean to
have a right not to work, and some answer to the ques-
tion as to why it is felt that we do not currently have a
right not to work (after all, we can choose not to work,
can't we?). I think time would be better spent focusing
specifically on the freedom-undermining effect of work
and its injustice, rather than on the precise social remedy
to this problem.

What about the rest of the argument.?

Well, premise 1 is a foundational normative assump-
tion, resting on the value of freedom in a liberal society.
We won't question it here.

Premise 2 is crucial because it provides more detail
on the nature of freedom. Although Maskivker may
argue that the three freedom-undermining conditions
mentioned in that premise are all part of what she

means by *effective control self-ownership*, I think it better not to take that view. Why? Because I think some of the conditions appeal to other concepts of freedom that are popular among other political theorists, and it would be better not to limit the argument to any particular conception.

Moving on, premise 3 is the specific claim about the freedom-undermining effect of work. Obviously, this too is crucial to Maskivker's overall case. The two conclusions then follow.

Here I look at the defence of condition (a) in premise 2 and premise 3; then at the defence of condition (b) in premise 2 and premise 3; and finally at the defence of condition (c) in premise 2 and premise 3.

Freedom, Time, and the 24/7 Workplace

Condition (a) is all about the need for an ability to choose how to use our time. Maskivker defends this requirement by starting out with a Lockean conception of freedom, one that is often beloved by libertarians. The Lockean conception holds that individuals are free in the sense that they have self-ownership. That is to say: they have ownership rights over their own bodies and the fruits of their labour. This fundamental right of self-ownership in turn implies a bundle of other rights (e.g. the right to transfer the fruits of one's labour to another). Any system of political authority must respect this fundamental right and its necessary implications.

The problem for Maskivker is that many fans of self-ownership limit themselves to a formal, rather than an effective, conception of that right. In other words,

they simply hold, in the abstract, that individuals have this right of self-ownership and that they should not be interfered with when exercising it. They don't think seriously about what it would take to ensure that everybody was really able to effectively enjoy this right. If they did this, they would realise that there are a number of social and evolutionary imbalances and injustices in the ability of individuals to exercise self-ownership. They would realise that, in order to effectively enjoy the right, individuals will also need access to resources.

Now, to be fair, some writers do recognise this. And they highlight the need for things like adequate education and healthcare in order for the right to self-ownership to be effective. Maskivker agrees with their approach. The originality of her contribution comes in its insistence on the importance of time as an essential resource for self-ownership. Time is, in many ways, the ultimate resource. Time is necessary for everything we do. Everything takes time. We may have skills and abilities, but they only really have value when we have the time to exercise them. Furthermore, time is a peculiarly non-manipulable resource. There is a limited amount of time in which we get to act out our lives. This makes it all the more important for people to have access to time.

You can probably see where this is going. The problem with work is that it robs us of time. We need jobs in order to live, and they take up most of our time. Some people argue that the modern realities of work are particularly insidious in this regard. Jonathan Crary, in his slightly dystopian and alarmist work, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, notes how work has colonised

our every waking hour and how it threatens to colonise our sleep too.

We are encouraged to make our time more productive, but also to be available to our workplaces at more times of the day, through email or social media. Indeed, the slow death of the regular 9-to-5 workday has, if anything, encouraged work to monopolise more of time. We have flexible working hours and our work may be more outcome-driven, but the marketplaces are open 24/7 and they demand more outcomes from us.

The result is an infiltration of work into every hour of the day.

Some people may not resent this. They may feel that they are living the kind of life they wish to live, that their work is enjoyable, and that it gives them a sense of purpose. But others feel differently. They feel that work takes away valuable opportunities to truly express themselves as they wish.

In sum, access to time and the time-limiting nature of work is one thing to think about when designing a scheme of distributive justice. An ability to opt out of work, or to have much less of it in one's life may be necessary if we are to have a just society.

Freedom and Authorship of One's Life

There is a related argument to made here about the ability to choose one's time. It can be connected to Maskivker's account of effective self-ownership, but it can also be separated from it. That's what condition (b) is about. It appeals to a distinctive notion of freedom as being the ability to exercise true authorship over one's

life. This is a slightly more metaphysical ideal of freedom, one that joins up with the debate about free will and responsibility.

To understand the idea, we need to think more about the individual who truly enjoys their work.

As I suggested at the end of the previous section, you could argue that there is nothing unjust about the current realities of work for such an individual. Granting them more free time, won't really help them to exercise more effective self-ownership. They are getting what they want from life.

Take me for example. I have already said that I enjoy my work, and I have been able to (I think) select a career that best suits my talents and abilities. I'm pretty sure I'm employing the scarce resource of time in a way that allows me to maximise my potential. I'm pretty sure there is nothing fundamentally unjust or freedom-undermining about my predicament. Maskivker wants to argue that there *is* something fundamentally unjust about my predicament. My freedom is not being respected in the way that it should. Despite all my claims about how much I enjoy my work, the reality is that I have to work. I have no real say in the matter. She uses an analogy between starving and fasting to make her point. When a person is starving or fasting, the physical results are often the same: their bodies are being deprived of essential nutrients. But there is something morally distinct about the two cases. The person who fasts has control over what is happening to their body. The person who is starving does not. The person who chooses to fast has authorship over their lives; the person who is starving is

having their story written by someone else.

When it comes to our work, there is a sense in which we are all starving, not fasting. We may enjoy it, embrace it, and endorse it, but at the end of the day we have to do it. That's true even in societies with generous welfare provisions, as most of those welfare provisions are conditional upon us either looking for work (and proving that we are), or being in some state of unavoidable disability or deprivation. We are not provided with an "easy out," nor with the freedom we need to become the true authors of our lives. (Maskivker notes that the introduction of a universal basic income could be a game-changer in this regard.)

As I said, in appealing to this notion of self-authorship, Maskivker is touching upon a more meta-physical ideal of freedom. Within the debate about free will, there are those who argue that the ability to do otherwise is essential for having free will. But there are also those (e.g. Harry Frankfurt and John Fischer) who argue that it is not. They sometimes say that being free and responsible simply requires the reflexive self-endorsement of one's actions and attitudes. The ability to do otherwise is irrelevant.

So what Maskivker is arguing is somewhat conten-tious, at least when considered in light of these other theories of freedom. She claims that her theory better captures the normative ideal of freedom. But there is much more to be said about this issue.

Freedom and the Absence of Coercive Offers
The final condition of freedom—condition (c)—is probably

the most straightforward. It has its origins in the classic liberal accounts of freedom as non-interference by coercion. It is introduced by Maskivker in an attempt to address a possible weakness in the argument thus far. Someone could argue that the mere absence of acceptable alternatives to work is not enough to imply that it undermines our freedom, or that it creates a fundamental injustice.

An analogy might help to make the point. Suppose you are crossing the desert. You have run out of water and are unlikely to make it out alive. As you are literally on your last legs, you come across a man who is selling water from a small stand. He is, however, selling it at an obscene price. It will cost you everything you have to get one litre of water (which will be just enough to make it out). Because of your desperate situation, you hand over everything you have. Was your choice to hand over everything free? Was it just for the man to sell the water at that price? Many would argue "no" because you had no acceptable alternative.

But now consider a variation on this scenario. Suppose that this time the man is selling water at a very low price, well below the typical market rate. It will cost you less than one dollar to get a litre of water. You gratefully hand over the money. Was your choice free this time? Remember, you are still in a desperate state. All that has changed is the price. Nevertheless, there is something less disturbing about this example. Your choice seems more "free," and the whole scenario seems more just.

The problem with the first case is that the man is exploiting your unfortunate situation. He knows you have no other choice and he wants to take you for everything that you've got. The second scenario lacks this

feature. In that case, he doesn't undermine your freedom, or violate some fundamental principle of justice, because he doesn't exploit your misfortune.

How does this apply to Maskivker's anti-work argument? Very simply. She claims that work, in the modern world, involves an exploitative bargain. There is no particular agent behind this exploitation. Rather, it is the broader society, with its embrace of the work ethic and its commitment to the necessity of work, that renders the decision to work exploitative:

> *Demanding fulltime work in exchange for a decent livelihood is comparable to demanding an exorbitant price for a bottle of water in the absence of competition. It leaves the individual vulnerable to the powerful party (society) in the face of the great loss to be suffered if the "offer" as stipulated is not taken (if one opts not to work while not independently wealthy)* (Maskivker 2010)

But isn't the abolition of work impossible?

Thus ends the defence of Maskivker's central argument.

As you can see, her claim is that the modern realities of work are such that they undermine our freedom and create a fundamental injustice in our society. This is because (conjunctively or disjunctively) work monopolises our time and limits our effective self-ownership; the absence of a viable alternative to work prevents us from being the true authors of our live; and/or society is presenting us with an exploitative bargain "you better be working or looking for work or else…"

You may be persuaded on each of these points. You may agree that a full (positive?) right not to work would

be nice. But you may think that it is naive and unrealistic. You may think that it is impossible to really avoid a life of work. Maskivker closes by considering two versions of this "impossibility" objection.

The first, which we might call the "strict impossibility" objection, works something like this:

6. *We all have basic needs (food, clothing, shelter etc); without these things we would die.*
7. *We have to work in order to secure these basic needs.*
8. *Therefore, we have to work.*

Maskivker has a very simply reply to this objection. She holds that premise 7 is false. Not all activities that are conducive to our survival are inevitable. At one point in time, we had to take the furs and hides of animals in order to stay warm enough to survive. We no longer have to do this. The connection between survival and procuring the furs and hides of animals has been severed. The same could happen to the connection between work and our basic needs.

Indeed, it is arguable that we no longer need to work all that much to secure our basic needs.

There are many labour saving devices in manufacturing and agriculture (and there are soon to be more) that obviate the need for work. And yet the social demand for work has, for some reason, not diminished. Surely this doesn't have to be the case? Surely we could allow more machines to secure our basic needs?

The second impossibility objection, which we might call the "collective action" objection, is probably more serious. It holds that while a right not to work might be

all well and good, the reality is that if everyone exercised that right, society would not be able to support its implementation. After all, somebody has to pay for the system. Maskivker's responses to this objection are, in my opinion, somewhat problematic.

She makes one basic point. She says that the existence of a right is not contingent upon whether it may be impossible to recognise it in certain social contexts, or whether universal exercise of that right would lead to negative outcomes. She uses two analogies to support this point.

First, she asks us to suppose that there is a universal right to healthcare. She then asks us to imagine that we live in a society in which there is some terrible natural disaster, which places huge strains on the healthcare system. The strains are such that the available resources will not be sufficient to save everyone. Maskivker argues that the universal right to healthcare still exists in this society. The limitations imposed by the natural disaster do not take away people's rights.

Second, she asks us to consider the right not to have children. She then points out that if everyone exercised the right not to have children, it would lead to a bad outcome: humanity would go extinct. Nevertheless, she argues, that this does not mean that the right not to have children does not exist.

In some ways, I accept Maskivker's point. I agree that a right may exist in the abstract even if its implementation creates problems. But I don't think that really addresses the collective action objection, and I don't think her analogies work that well.

With regards to the right to healthcare in the disasterzone, I'm inclined to think that the limitations of the available resources would compromise or limit the right to healthcare.

And with regards to the right not to have children, I think there is something fundamentally different about the problems that arise when we collectively head towards our own extinction and the problems that might arise if everyone stopped working.

In the former case, no individuals would be harmed by the collective exercise of the right: the future generations who would have existed, do not exist and cannot be harmed. But in the latter case, there are individuals who might be harmed. For example, if doctors and nurses stopped working, their patients would be harmed. So I'm not sure that Maskivker has really grappled with the collective action objection. I think she tries to sidestep it, but in a manner that will be unpersuasive to its proponents.

Conclusion

To briefly sum up, Maskivker presents an anti-work argument that focuses on the ways in which work undermines our freedom. She argues that this happens in three ways.

First, work robs us of time, which is an essential resource if we are to have effective self-ownership.

Second, work prevents us from being the true authors of our lives because there is no acceptable alternative to work (even in societies with social welfare).

And third, because work involves an exploitative

bargain: we must work, or else.

I think there is much of value in Maskivker's article. I like how she focuses on time as a resource, one that should be included in any scheme of distributive justice. I also like how she integrates the anti-work critique with certain aspects of the mainstream literature on freedom, self-control, and justice.

But I fear she dodges the collective action objection to the anti-work position. This is where I think that technology, and in particular a deeper awareness of the drive toward automation and technological unemployment could be a useful addition to the anti-work critique.

But that's an argument for another day.

Inclined Labor

Grant Mincy (2014)

It was a cool, blustery, October morning in 2007 when I realized the difference between work and labor. I was standing on the side of a country road in Tumwater, Washington waiting for my work crew to come pick me up. I had moved to the area from Tennessee just days before—a recent graduate with a service year ahead of me. I had accepted a contract position with the Washington Conservation Corps, a program dedicated to salmon habitat conservation and restoration ecology. I was soon picked up by my fellow corps members and taken to our lock-up.

Here, we loaded our rig with numerous tools for trail construction—Pulaski's, Macleod's, chain saws and more. By that evening we had bagged Eagle's Peak in Mount Rainier National Park, completing the fall drainage on the trail. It was my first day of "spike," eight days in the back country digging re-routes and building trail—my first vivid memory of *inclined* labor.

I had of course labored before this day, but this experience sticks out because I was fortunate enough during my time on the mountain to wake up every day and enjoy my labor. I enjoyed the manual exercise, crafting trail, working lightly on the land and exploring the forest. These activities were required of the job, but they did not feel like work. I viewed these tasks favorably, I was disposed towards these activities—to labor with the rock and soil of Earth. The job felt different from anything I had done before, it fit with my belief system and

attitude towards life. I was practicing conservation and further developing a sense of wildness.

During this service year I befriended a fellow corps member by the name of Nicholas Wooten.

We would talk science and philosophy, argue politics, talk about how things could/should be and would sometimes just get wild and drunk. Most of the time, however, Nick and I talked philosophy (and still do). During one of our conversations, Nick shared with me a quote that is rather important to him—it is now rather important to me.

It is from the work of Marcus Aurelius in his piece *The Meditations*:

> *In the morning when thou risest unwillingly, let this thought be present—I am rising to the work of a human being. Why then am I dissatisfied if I am going to do the things for which I exist and for which I was brought into the world? Or have I been made for this, to lie in the bedclothes and keep myself warm?—But this is more pleasant.—Dost thou exist then to take thy pleasure, and not at all for action or exertion? Dost thou not see the little plants, the little birds, the ants, the spiders, the bees working together to put in order their several parts of the universe? And art thou unwilling to do the work of a human being, and dost thou not make haste to do that which is according to thy nature?—But it is necessary to take rest also.-*
> *It is necessary: however nature has fixed bounds to this too: she has fixed bounds both to eating and drinking, and yet thou goest beyond these bounds, beyond what is sufficient; yet in thy acts it is not so, but thou stoppest short of what thou canst do.*

*So thou lovest not thyself, for if thou didst, thou wouldst
love thy nature and her will. But those who love their
several arts exhaust themselves in working at them un-
washed and without food; but thou valuest thy own own
nature less than the turner values the turning art, or the
dancer the dancing art, or the lover of money values his
money, or the vainglorious man his little glory.
And such men, when they have a violent affection to a thing,
choose neither to eat nor to sleep rather than to perfect the
things which they care for. But are the acts which concern
society more vile in thy eyes and less worthy of thy labour?
How easy it is to repel and to wipe away every impression
which is troublesome or unsuitable, and immediately to be
in all tranquility*

There is much to say about this quote. Personally, it
has helped me mold together an idea that I call inclined
labor. I write about inclined labor often but I have never
defined the concept.

To be inclined is to feel a willingness to accomplish,
or a drawing toward, a particular action belief or attitude.
Labor is physical or mental exertion—but it is very
different from work.

Work is a series of tasks that must be completed to
achieve a certain goal—be it to gain a wage or to see that
something functions properly.

Labor is categorically different. Individual labor
happens on its own terms, willed by the desire to com-
plete a task. Work must be done, it is an intended activity.
Inclined labor, however, is the physical and mental
exertion that human beings are drawn to.

Inclined labor, then, is directly tied to the opening

of Marcus Aurelius's passage:

In the morning when thou risest unwillingly, let this thought be present— I am rising to the work of a human being. Why then am I dissatisfied if I am going to do the things for which I exist and for which I was brought into the world?

Inclined labor is the true work of a human being—and it can only be actualized in liberty.

Today we work plenty but struggle to find time and energy to award ourselves the opportunity to truly labor. Work for economical means is a relatively new activity of human beings. Every civilization has had to work— chores need to be carried out for society to function. For the vast majority of our 200,000 year history as a modern species, however, our societies were much more egalitarian. In our early history there was much more labor—individuals knew their interests and carried out their functions and roles within their communities.

It was not until the rise of power structures in the age of the ancients that human labor was viewed as something to command and control. Such authority has only gotten stronger under the rise and fall of nation-states. Work as we know it today has only been dominant across the whole of society since the advent of industrial capitalism. Work is no longer something shared cooperatively for the functioning of society—work now defines a controlled economic system.

But we are a vigilant species. Over the millenia, and ever-persistent today, human beings have continued to labor. How could we not when labor is inclined?

Imagine an economic system crafted by liberated

human beings. What are the possibilities of humanity? How would the products of self-directed labor progress and build society? What can we craft together during our time in the sun? What will liberated labor gift to future generations as we progress for millenia to come? How wondrous our civilizations and progress will be!

Inclined labor, whether a physical or mental exercise, is the creative expression of our interests and ingenuity—it is what we are driven to do. Our labor deserves to be liberated for it is ours and solely ours. Inclined labor is the true calling of human beings.

Stress, Labor, & Play
William Gillis (2010)

There's a lot of talk in anarchist circles about abolishing
work. Some of it in line with the dream of a high-tech-
nology path to post-scarcity. But a lot of it takes an
alternative route and settles for simply building a ludic
society—that is to say a culture that adapts its tasks into
"play." Like a lot of romantic, boundary-pushing, post-
leftish notions it's purposefully detached from precise
conceptual formulations, but the general notion is that
the exertion fundamentally necessary to, you know,
keeping us alive should be fun rather than drudgerous.
Appealing to the dichotomy of association we distinguish
between "work" and "play."

But while this is an intuitive bundling, I think there's
an analytical weakness worth noting, or at least a reality
getting glossed over. Ignoring all the vectors of drudgery
that plague the modern world there's still a fundamental
conceptual distinction between projects that we undertake
that have serious consequences and projects that do not.
Drudgery and alienation—in short *disinterest*—can be
eliminated, but stress is a different beast.

A game of calvinball for instance is an undertaking of
pure (random) process divorced from results. There's
nothing to invest in and/or nothing we might invest.
Roughhousing, shenanigans, fiddling, aimless explora-
tion. These allow us to engage in action without belaboring
ourselves with concern. Naturally they carry with them an
immense sense of freedom and relief. But while the process

135

of undertaking projects with real-world consequences *can* be fun and a chance to scratch personal itches, their very synchronicity with our driving desires can instigate a radically different experience. While it's perfectly rational to talk of a world in which we are no longer forced to take actions we'd rather not, eliminating all perception of weightiness to those actions is a different and much stronger type of impossible. There are plenty of actions we ultimately *want* to take that at the same time inspire trepidation and tension.

Duh, right? But in the succulent rhetoricism of dismissing work I think there's been an insipid conflation between these negative associations. Stress has somewhat paradoxically gotten bundled with disinterest. And liberation implicitly set in opposition to both.

Now don't get me wrong, there's value to consequenceless play—it helps us practice process and overwrites the klaxons ringing in our brains. Play frees up mental space, allowing us to reboot while at the same time charging up our minds or at least lets us keep rolling rather than go dead. But its value is in balancing and augmenting our stressful pursuits. The danger is that in certain circumstances the easy, investment-minimal repetitive action found in such play can invoke empty illusions of productivity. Because this gratifying sensation of pseudo-accomplishment comes without the stress of substantive commitment and concern it can become a sinkhole ultimately just as alienating as wage-slavery.

It's not hard to see examples throughout the milieu of people intuitively appealing to this bundled notion of liberation choosing incredibly unproductive patterns of action. This isn't the time or place to call out specific embarrassments, but in illustration we're obviously all

familiar with occasions of rhapsodic "we did such and such lame thing and it felt so liberating" where strategic vigilance is intentionally thrown out the window. (I'm just grabbing a common touchpoint. Insurrectionary approaches can have very good arguments—even for not being particularly rational on some levels—but y'all can't argue that sometimes shit claimed as such ends up just stupid.)

Relieving stress is great, but when it's set in artificial either/or conflict with caring enough to get wrapped up in an undertaking—vigilantly struggling to affect some consequence—what results isn't a liberation of our desires, but a broadening flatness to our lives. Pursuing desires is part and parcel of being human, and it's ridiculous to presume that that won't occasionally require investments, risk, and the attentive concern that comes with that. Don't get me wrong, meetings suck. There are a great many components to the psychologically taxing projects we undertake in this movement that could seriously stand some massive revision/abolition. But the mere fact that such projects can be stressful and taxing is not proof that they're dismissible reproductions of the forms of labor we seek to abolish.

The Ecology of Play

Grant A. Mincy (2016)

Off the southern slopes of Bird Mountain in Tennessee the headwaters of Flat Fork emerge. The waters trickle into one another and build momentum as they carve into ancient Cumberland rock, through a lush, damp hardwood forest of poplar and hemlock as they twist and turn on the long journey to the Emory River. Fish and insects, coyotes and numerous other animals lap up these waters of Flat Fork. All is normal, until the mist of Frozen Head State Park.

Just next to campsite 1, the monster growls.

With crooked fingers and twisted grin, the monster picks up stones and hurls them into water. Splash! Roar! Growl! Laughter fills the forest. The monster is a child at play.

Play is a rather interesting phenomenon as it is not easily defined by biology. On the one hand, it burns a lot of energy on seemingly meaningless activities. Why burn energy if not at risk to a predator? But that is the catch—just because activities seem meaningless, doesn't mean they are. When exercise is involved, for example, be it by running, jumping, or moving stones in a creek, play increases motor skills, muscle mass, and even the oxygen-carrying capacity of blood. Play is pleasurable, and it stimulates the central nervous system.

Play is self-directed, free from the confines of what we may call "work"—tedious chores that need to be done. Play is a spontaneous leisure time activity, but is

also emotional. Play brings mostly joy, but can also bring frustration. Thus, play is also a bit of "labor"—a task we are inclined to do.

There are three methods of play: Locomotive play, social play, and object play.

Locomotive play involves movement for movement's sake. Examples would be tag, hide and seek, climbing trees and other activities that enhance locomotive skills.

Social play involves juveniles or adults of the same age engaged in activity together. There are usually rubrics or rules involved, along with a bit of imagination and creativity in a group setting. This of course enhances social bonds and strengthens community relationships.

Object play of course involves objects—pots and pans, musical instruments, ABC blocks, Jenga, and so forth. Object play allows those involved to master certain skills.

The three types are distinct in theory but in practice are mixed and mingled, enjoyed between juveniles and adults—again advancing the social and individual capacities of those involved.

Play adapts and changes over time. We are perhaps programmed to think only the young play, but this is not the case. Adults play with the young and with each other all the time. Some of this is pure leisure activity; sometimes it is physical, sometimes cognitive. The only difference is that as the animal matures, play becomes more intricate.

Whatever the types of play are, or the ages of those who partake, play is at its core an inclined, self-directed,

recreational activity practiced in leisure time. So what is it that limits play? Of course, it is the discipline of a complex society—a society that requires work as opposed to labor, schooling for skills as opposed to lessons for knowledge and innate interests. It is this "working culture" that denies children and adults alike both play and inclined labor. Children are sat in desks, inside classrooms where teachers lecture. As for adults, many of us, no matter how free or rewarding the job, spend a lot of time on mundane clerical or manual tasks. Each setting is at odds with our urge to play and engage in self-fulfilling labor.

This has numerous ill effects on society, especially regarding the young. From an evolutionary standpoint, lack of leisure time is dangerous. Play, especially rough and tumble play, is a homologous trait shared by all mammals—humans included. This is because play enhances social ties, develops the social brain and even deeper brain functions by generating new scenarios to make fun.

Though adults have fully developed brains, working culture reduces the individual's ability to labor on self-directed projects, enhance social bonds and engage ones community. Work reduces the amount of leisure time we have to play with family—especially our children who simply long to play with us. With more leisure time our families, communities and natural environment will be better off.

Personally, I have many leisure time activities that, depending on my mood, I love to partake in. Sometimes it's watching movies or sports to decompress. Sometimes

it is laying on a blanket outdoors with a beer and a good book. Perhaps it's sitting next to a mountain stream or gazing into the forest canopy to simply think. Sometimes I hike or trail run. Sometimes I choose to labor during my leisure time—by writing for example. Sometimes, my favorite times, I will mix labor and play.

Sunday afternoons are spent with my family. I've mastered the art of jazzy smoked chicken and I love preparing meals for my wife and child. On a perfect afternoon, with toddler in tow, we will listen to music (perhaps some Everybody Knows this is Nowhere—great album!) chop onions and celery, mix them with select herbs and spices and dress a chicken. The child loves to "help" as we cook and laughs as he enjoys snacks and watching to process. Soon the chicken is on the smoker. With classic rock in the background, "beats" is what the boy calls music, we will have a dance party as the protein unwinds. Perhaps we will kick a soccer ball around, perhaps play "air plane" and fly across the yard. But, no matter what, we play, bond and love.

When it's time to pull the chicken it's back to the labor of the kitchen. Undoubtedly, more vegetables will be chopped as the meal comes together. I greatly enjoy the method. As I slice plants to enhance a meals flavor I talk to the child and tell him all about the process. He watches and listens intently as I describe how cooking helped us become human. When carving time comes the boy is right by my side, devouring bits and pieces of the protein as the process goes on. It's fun, and my favorite way to pass the time. Cooking is an enjoyable labor of love, an opportunity to play with the child and riddled

with human liberty. The Sunday meal usually takes between five to seven hours to prepare. That is five to seven hours of free liberated time, a full day's activity, spent on inclined labor and play.

So what of our communities? If play enhances social bonds, then this leisure time activity will also enhance the common good. I see it happening in my neighborhood right now. Community members have come together to cultivate new markets, community spaces and family friendly events. Long economically depressed, the neighborhood is on the up. Numerous "neighborhood cleanups" have been organized. Even a "Bio-Blitz" or two have occurred in the neighborhood to identify local plants. These activities are fun, adults and children alike create games on these days. Who can identify the first Cornus florida, or arrange acorns in the shape of a butterfly?

It's community play. Adults and children alike, of all different ages and social backgrounds, get to know one another. As a result I see community members helping local business partners paint or build their shops, free of charge. Locals are also pitching in their labor to build trail systems around the unique South Knoxville Urban Wilderness. With mattock, Pulaski or shovel they manually labor on the trail. Trail building is actually a lot of fun, and there is a great sense of accomplishment once the activity is completed.

Whether pitching in for local markets or trail-work, these are soon to be places for us all to congregate with one another, to talk about how the neighborhood is on the up. Spaces to laugh with one another, share a beer or

a meal, and tell stories. They are local institutions—places we can come together as a community in our leisure time to play.

Now, imagine what a free society, one that works less but labors and plays more, could accomplish.

Of course the natural environment, whether acorns on the playground or truly wild spaces, is crucial for a society to play. Personally speaking outdoor play has had a huge influence on my life. I actually think it was time spent with my parents in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, playing in streams and learning about the Appalachian environment that instilled my lifelong wonder of natural systems.

Such natural splendor is in trouble, though, as we experience Earth's sixth mass extinction. I think a large part of the current extinction is due to a human crisis— the loss of play and removal of children from the natural environment. It is the young and future generations, who will need to protect ecosystems. As today's young lose touch with nature, future generations may not get the chance to experience her grandeur.

This is sad, because nothing compares to outdoor play. I, of course, do not disparage indoor play—instead I love it! But, outdoor play is fundamentally different and comes with its own unique sets of values and experiences. The greatest joy of nature is that natural systems are truly anarchic. The natural mechanisms that craft the great outdoors are free of human dominance and the Levia- thans of modern civilization. As we lose species, as habitat is lost, it is heartbreaking to think the young, and those yet unborn, will never experience the excitement of a

bio–luminescent bay, or simply throw rocks into pure mountain streams.

Sad as it is, a child at play in nature is becoming a rare occurrence. There are many reasons as to why. The world is becoming more urbanized as more and more people move to the city. This in and of itself is not a bad thing, and can actually be good for environmental purposes, but urbanites tend to work long hours. This means there is less time for leisure. With notable exceptions, urban landscapes are gray with little of the natural environment present.

Parenting has shifted as well. The culture fears strangers much more than in the past (though major studies indicate crimes against children, such as kidnapping, are plummeting). Spaces of capital exclusion exist all over urban landscapes, as common spaces shrink in number. The aforementioned structure of indoor schooling and of a child's time comes to play as well. As a result, it is the indoors that occupy the work and leisure time of children and adults alike.

As detrimental this disconnection is for adults, it is a great disservice to our children and all future generations. Contact with nature stimulates creativity in children. Take the work of now famous education specialist Edith Cobb, for example. In her essay, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*, she noted that children who had grand experiences in the natural world between the ages of five and 12 experienced greater cognitive development than their peers who did not.

Plants and animals, Cobb argued, are among "the figures of speech in the rhetoric of play … which the

genius in particular of later life seems to recall."

Play is more creative outdoors. The fantasy that develops in natural landscapes requires more time and imagination to evolve because natural systems are far more complex than the standard human dominated landscape. It is not just fantasy and role play that guide the activity, but also reason and observation of the surrounding ecosystem.

The argument could be made that forcing children to desks and making them study so much is counterproductive—that the key to a child's enlightenment is actually play. Let them run, the wild animals, through the woods and across tall grass. Let them chase fire flies and gaze into the piercing night sky with wonder. Let them sit on a log and watch the clouds go by. Let them be still and think about the world.

The sad thing is, most of us who are inclined to protect such experiences are those of us who spent a good amount of time in the natural world as children. Why fight for something if it was never experienced?

Play is of fundamental importance to human civilization. So too is wilderness. How can we truly know ourselves if the wild is lost? How can we ever be free? Systems of power and domination have no choice but to loathe and fear the anarchic ecstasy that defines the wild. So without it, without the delight of play in the great out there, how can we ever understand human liberty? How will future generations ever know humanity?

Forest Schools and Montessori approaches to education, programs such as Outward Bound and the National Outdoor Leadership School, local nature

centers, urban forests, a rejuvenated celebration of wilderness and other methods of reconciliation ecology will help us all reclaim our commons. They will help us all reclaim our right to the wild and thus the possibility of truly understanding ourselves. In the final analysis, alternatives to work and restored time for leisurely activities are essential to a life worth living.

Play is liberation, our great hope.

Anti-Work and Technological Unemployment

Preface

Nick Ford

In this section we'll take a look at arguments in favor of technological unemployment while considering those against. I chose to include this section as a direct challenge to those who think automation is *inherently* evil. Instead, I and many of the other contributors in this section tend to think that *capitalism* makes automation a much more difficult process than it needs to be, which means that we should continue our fight against capitalism and the state, not technology or automation.

Are We Heading Towards Technological Unemployment? An Argument leads off this section by summing up some of the best anti-work arguments I've seen for automation's inevitability and benefits. Danaher is quick to pause, guard, and caveat his claims at every turn and leaves few stones unturned in this fascinating set of arguments for a better world.

Capitalism, Not Technological Unemployment, is the Problem sums up the main takeaway of this section through the title alone. But what's just as remarkable is how Carson takes such a technical and economic approach to these matters and still elucidates clearly what the systemic issues we face with technology are, under capitalism.

The David Autor Series is a set of responses to Econo-

mist Autor, focusing on arguments *against* technological employment happening or being beneficial. Danaher lays out various effects that Autor thinks will prevent technological unemployment from happening.

When Jobs Become Obsolete asks some big questions about the future of jobs when technology has already become such a big part of our working lives. Mr. Wilson doesn't give us all of the answers to these questions but he leaves us with a sense of hope that things'll turn out in the favor of those who oppose work.

Nicholas Carr Response 3 is from a series of responses Danaher made to Nicholas Carr's book *The Glass.* I picked the third response as the one to publish as it fits the theme of the book best, but all are worth reading. Despite what Danaher takes as the book's overly-pessimistic view, he thinks Carr raises some interesting points about the limits of automation and engages with them thoughtfully.

Are We Heading for Technological Unemployment? An Argument

John Danaher (2014)

We're all familiar with the headlines by now: "Robots are going to steal our jobs," "Automation will lead to joblessness," and "AI will replace human labour." It seems like more and more people are concerned about the possible impact of advanced technology on employment patterns. Last month, Lawrence Summers worried about it in the *Wall Street Journal* but thought maybe the government could solve the problem. Soon after, Vivek Wadhwa worried about it in the *Washington Post*, arguing that there was nothing the government could do. Over on the *New York Times*, Paul Krugman has been worrying about it for years. But is this really something we should worry about?

To answer that, we need to distinguish two related questions:

The Factual Question: Will advances in technology actually lead to technological unemployment?

The Value Question: Would long-term technological unemployment be a bad thing (for us as individuals, for society, etc)?

I think the answer to the value question is a complex one. There are certainly concerns about technological unemployment—particularly its tendency to exacerbate social inequality—but there are also potential boons— freedom from routine drudge work, more leisure time, and so on. It would be worth pursuing these issues

further. Nevertheless, in this post I want to set the value question to one side. This is because the answer to that question is going to depend on the answer to the factual question: there is no point worrying or celebrating technological unemployment if it's never going to happen.

What I want to do is answer the factual question. More precisely, I want to try to evaluate the arguments for and against the likelihood of technological unemployment. I'll start by looking at an intuitively appealing, but ultimately naive, argument in favour of technological unemployment. As I'll point out, many mainstream economists find fault with this argument because they think that one of the assumptions it rests on is false.

I'll then outline five reasons for thinking that the mainstream view is wrong. This will leave us with a more robust argument for technological unemployment. I will reach no final conclusion about the merits of that argument. As with all future-oriented debates, I think there is plenty of room for doubt and disagreement. I will, however, suggest that the argument in favour of technological unemployment is a plausible one and that we should definitely think about the possible future to which it points.

My major reference point for all this will be the discussion of technological unemployment in Brynjolfsson and McAfee's *The Second Machine Age*.

1. The Naive Argument and the Luddite Fallacy

To start off with, we need to get clear about the nature of technological unemployment.

In its simplest sense, technological unemployment is

just the replacement of human labour by machine *labour* (where the term "machine" is broadly construed and where one can doubt whether we should call what machines do "labour"). This sort of replacement happens all the time, and has happened throughout human history. In many cases, the unemployment that results is *temporary*: either the workers who are displaced find new forms of work, or, even if those particular workers don't, the majority of human beings do, over the long term.

Contemporary debates about technological unemployment are not concerned with this temporary form of unemployment; instead, they are concerned with the possibility of technology leading to *long-term structural unemployment*. This would happen if displaced workers, and future generations of workers, cannot find new forms of employment, even over the long-term. This *does not mean that there will be no human workers in the long term*; just that there will be a significantly reduced number of them (in percentage terms). Thus, we might go from a world in which there is a 10% unemployment rate, to a world in which there is a 70, 80, or 90% unemployment rate. This is the kind I discuss below.

So what are the arguments? In many everyday conversations (at least the conversations that I have) the argument in favour of technological unemployment takes an enthymematic form. That is to say, it consists of one factual/predictive premise and a conclusion. Here's my attempt to formulate it:

1. *Advances in technology are replacing more and more forms of existing human labour.*
2. *Therefore, there will be technological unemployment.*

The problem with this argument is that it is formally invalid. This is the case with all enthymemes. We are not entitled to draw that conclusion from that premise alone. Still, formal invalidity will not always stop someone from accepting an argument. The argument might seem intuitively appealing because it relies on a *suppressed* or *implied* premise that people find compelling. We'll talk about that suppressed premise in a moment, and why many economists doubt it. Before we do that though, it's worth briefly outlining the case for premise 1.

That case rests on several different strands of evidence. The first is just a list of enumerative examples, i.e. cases in which technological advances are replacing existing forms of human labour. You could probably compile a list of such examples yourself. Obviously, many forms of manufacturing and agricultural labour have already been replaced by machines. This is why we no longer rely on humans to build cars, plough fields, and milk cows (there are still humans involved in those processes, to be sure, but their numbers are massively diminished when compared with the past). Indeed, even those forms of agricultural and manufacturing labour that have remained resistant to technological displacement—e.g. fruit pickers—may soon topple.

There are other examples too: machines are now replacing huge numbers of service sector jobs, from supermarket checkout workers and bank tellers, to tax consultants and lawyers; advances in robotic driving seem likely to displace truckers and taxi drivers in the not-too-distant future; doctors may soon see diagnostics outsourced to algorithms; and the list goes on and on.

In addition to these examples of displacement, there are trends in the economic data that are also suggestive of displacement. Brynjolfsson and McAfee outline some of this in chapter 9 of their book. One example is recent data suggesting that in the US and elsewhere, capital's share of national income has been going up while labour's share has been going down. In other words, even though productivity is up overall, human workers are taking a reduced share of those productivity gains. More is going to capital, and technology is one of the main drivers of this shift (since technology is a form of capital).

Another piece of evidence comes from the fact that since the 1990s recessions have, per usual, been followed by recoveries, but these recoveries have tended not to significantly increase overall levels of employment. This means that productivity gains are not matched by employment gains.

Why is this happening? Again, the suggestion is that businesses find that technology can replace some of the human labour they relied on prior to the recession. There is consequently no need to rehire workers to spur the recovery. This seems to be especially true of the post–2008 recovery.

So premise 1 looks to be solid. What about the suppressed premise? First, here's my suggestion for what that suppressed premise looks like:

3. **Nowhere to go**: *If technology replaces all existing forms of human labour, and there are no other forms of work for humans to go to, then there will be technological unemployment.*

This plugs the logical gap in the initial argument.

But it does so at a cost.

The cost is that many economists think that the "nowhere to go" claim is false. Indeed, they even have a name for it. They call it the Luddite Fallacy, inspired by the Luddites, who protested against the automation of textile work during the Industrial Revolution. History seems to suggest that the Luddite concerns about unemployment were misplaced. Automation has not, in fact, led to increased long-term unemployment. Instead, human labour has found new areas. What's more, there appear to be sound economic reasons for this, grounded in basic economic theory. Machines replace humans because machines increase productivity at a reduced cost. In other words, you can get more for less if you replace a human worker with a machine. This in turn reduces the costs of economic outputs on the open market. When costs go down, demand goes up. This increase in demand should spur the need or desire for more human workers, either to complement the machines in existing industries, or to assist entrepreneurial endeavours in new markets.

So, embedded in the economists' notion of the Luddite Fallacy are two rebuttals to the suppressed premise:

4. **Theoretical Rebuttal**: *Economic theory suggests that the increased productivity from machine labour will reduce costs, increase demand, and expand opportunities for existing or novel forms of human labour.*

5. **Evidential Rebuttal**: *Accumulated evidence, over the past two hundred years, suggests that technological unemployment is at most a temporary problem: humans have always seemed to find other forms of work.*

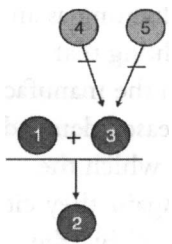Are these rebuttals any good? There are five reasons

for thinking they aren't.

2. Five Reasons to Question the Luddite Fallacy

The five reasons are drawn from Brynjolfsson and McAfee's book. I will refer to them as "problems" for the mainstream approach. The first is as follows:

6. **The Inelastic Demand Problem:** *The theoretical rebuttal assumes that demand for outputs will be elastic (i.e. that reductions in price will lead to increases in demand), but this may not be true. It may not be true for particular products and services, and it may not be true for entire industries. Historical*

The Naive Argument with the Luddite Fallacy

1. Advances in technology are replacing more and more forms of existing human labor.

3. *Nowhere to go:* If technology replaces all existing forms of human labor, and there are no other forms of work for humans to do, then there will be technological unemployment.

2. Therefore there will be technological unemployment.

4. *Theoretical rebuttal:* Economic theory suggests that the increased productivity from machine labor will reduce costs, increase demand, and expand opportunities for existing or novel forms of human labor.

5. *Evidential rebuttal:* Accumulated evidence, over the past 200 years, suggests that technological unemployment is at most a temporary problem: humans have always seemed to find other forms of work.

evidence seems to bear out this point.

Let's go through this in a little more detail. The elasticity of demand is a measure of how sensitive demand is to changes in price. The higher the elasticity, the higher the the sensitivity; the lower the elasticity, the lower the sensitivity. If a particular good or service has a demand elasticity of one, then for every 1% reduction in price, there will be a corresponding 1% increase in demand for that good or service. Demand is *inelastic* when it is relatively insensitive to changes in price. In other words, consumers tend to demand about the same over time (elasticity of zero).

The claim made by proponents of the Luddite Fallacy is that the demand elasticity for human labour, in the overall economy, is around 1, over the long haul. But as McAfee and Brynjolfsson point out, that isn't true in all cases. There are particular products for which there is pretty inelastic demand. They cite artificial lighting as an example: there is only so much artificial lighting that people need. Increased productivity gains in the manufacture of artificial lighting don't result in increased demand.

Similarly, there are entire industries in which the demand elasticity for labour is pretty low. Again, they cite manufacturing and agriculture as examples of this: the productivity gains from technology in these industries do not lead to increased demand for human workers in those industries.

Of course, lovers of the Luddite Fallacy respond to this by arguing that it doesn't matter if the demand for particular goods or services, or even particular industries, is inelastic. What matters is whether human ingenuity

and creativity can find new markets, i.e. new outlets for human labour. They argue that it can, and, more pointedly, that it always has. The next two arguments against the Luddite Fallacy give reason to doubt this too.

7. **The Outpacing Problem:** *The theoretical rebuttal assumes that the rate of technological improvement will not outpace the rate at which humans can retrain, upskill, or create new job opportunities. But this is dubious. It is possible that the rate of technological development will outpace these human abilities.*

I think this argument speaks for itself. For what it's worth, when JM Keynes first coined the term "technological unemployment," it was this outpacing problem that he had in mind. If machines displace human workers in one industry (e.g. manufacturing) but there are still jobs in other industries (e.g. computer programming), then it is theoretically possible for those workers (or future generations of workers) to train themselves to find jobs in those other industries. This would solve the temporary problem of automation. But this assumes that humans will have the time to develop those skills.

In the computer age, we have witnessed exponential improvements in technology. It is possible that these exponential improvements will continue, and will mean that humans cannot redeploy their labour fast enough. Thus, I could encourage my children to train to become software engineers, but by the time they developed those skills, machines might be better software engineers than most humans.

The third problem is perhaps the most significant:

8. **The Inequality Problem:** *The technological infrastructure we have already created means that less human labour is*

needed to capture certain markets (even new ones). Thus, even if people do create new markets for new products and services, it won't translate into increased levels of employment.

This one takes a little bit of explanation. There are two key trends in contemporary economics. First is the fact that an increasing number of goods and services are being digitized (with the advent of 3D printing, this now includes physical goods). Digitization allows for those goods and services to be replicated at near zero marginal cost (since it costs relatively little for a digital copy to be made). If I record a song, I can have it online in an instant, and millions of digital copies can be made in a matter of hours. The initial recording and production may cost me a little bit, but the marginal cost of producing more copies is virtually zero.

A second key trend in contemporary economics is the existence of globalised networks for the distribution of goods and services. This is obviously true of digital goods and services, which can be distributed via the internet. But it is also true of non-digital goods, which can rely on vastly improved transport networks for near-global distribution.

These two trends have led to more and more "winner takes all" markets. In other words, markets in which being the second (or third or fourth…) best provider of a good or service is not enough: all the income tends to flow to one participant. Consider services like Facebook, Youtube, Google and Amazon. They dominate particular markets thanks to globalised networks and cheap marginal costs. Why go to the local bookseller when you have the best and cheapest book-

store in the world at your fingertips?

The fact that the existing infrastructure makes winner takes all markets more common has pretty devastating implications for long-term employment. If it takes less labour input to capture an entire market—even a new one—then new markets won't translate into increased levels of employment. There are some good recent examples of this. Instagram and WhatsApp have managed to capture near-global markets for photo-sharing and free messaging, but with relatively few employees. (Note: there is some hyperbole in this, but the point still holds. Even if the best service provider doesn't capture the *entire* market, there is still less opportunity for less-good providers to capture a viable share of the market. This still reduces likely employment opportunities.)

The fourth problem with the Luddite Fallacy has to do with its reliance on historical data:

9. ***The Historical Data Problem:*** *Proponents of the Luddite Fallacy may be making unwarranted inferences from the historical data. It may be that, historically, technological improvements were always matched by corresponding improvements in the human ability to retrain and find new markets. But that's because we were looking at the relative linear portion of an exponential growth curve. As we now enter a period of rapid growth, things may be different.*

In essence, this is just a repeat of the point made earlier about the outpacing problem. The only difference is that this time it is specifically targeted at the use of historical data to support inferences about the future. That said, Brynjolfsson and McAfee do suggest that recent data support this argument. As mentioned earlier, since the

1990s job growth has "decoupled" from productivity: the number of jobs being created is not matching the productivity gains. This may be the first sign that we have entered the period of rapid technological advance.

The fifth and final problem is essentially just a thought experiment:

10. **The Android Problem:** *Suppose androids could be created. These androids could do everything humans could do, only more efficiently (no illness, no boredom, no sleep) and at a reduced cost. In such a world, every rational economic actor would replace human labour with android labour. This would lead to technological unemployment.*

The reason why this thought experiment is relevant here is that there doesn't seem to be anything unfeasible about the creation of androids: it could happen that we create such entities. If so, there is reason to think technological unemployment will happen. What's more, this could arise even if the androids are not perfect facsimiles of human beings. It could be that there are one or two skills that the androids can't compete with humans on. Even still, this will lead to a problem because it will mean that more and more humans will be competing for jobs that involve those one or two skills.

3. Conclusion

So there you have it: an argument for technological unemployment. At first, it was naively stated, but when defended from criticism, it looks more robust.

It is indeed wrong to assume that the mere replacement of existing forms of human labour by machines will lead to technological unemployment, but if the

Rebuttal of the Luddite Fallacy

1. Advances in technology are replacing more and more forms of existing human labor.

3. *Nowhere to go*: If technology replaces all existing forms of human labor, and there are no other forms of work for humans to do, then there will be technological unemployment.

2. Therefore there will be technological unemployment.

4. *Theoretical rebuttal*: Economic theory suggests that the increased productivity from machine labor will reduce costs, increase demand, and expand opportunities for existing or novel forms of human labor.

5. *Evidential rebuttal*: Accumulated evidence, over the past 200 years, suggests that technological unemployment is at most a temporary problem: humans have always seemed to find other forms of work.

6. *The Inelastic Demand Problem*: The theoretical rebuttal assumes that demand for outputs will be elastic (i.e. that reductions in price will lead to increases in demand), but this may not be true, either for goods and services, or for entire industries. History seems to point to this.

7. *The Outpacing Problem*: The theoretical rebuttal assumes that the rate of technological improvement will not outpace the retraining, upskilling, and creation of new jobs for humans. But this is not a given.

8. *The Inequality Problem*: The technological infrastructure we have already created means that less human labor is needed to capture some markets (even new ones). Thus, even if people do create new markets for new products and services, it won't translate into increased levels of human employment.

9. *The Historical Data Problem*: Proponents of the Luddite Fallacy may be making unwarranted inferences from the historical data. It may be that technological improvements have always been matched, historically, by correspoding improvements in human retraining and finding new markets. But we were looking at the relative linear portion of an exponential growth curve. As we enter a period of rapid growth, things may be different.

10. *The Android Problem*: Suppose androids are created. They could do everything humans do, only more efficiently (no illness, no boredom, no sleep) and more cheaply. Every rational actor would replace human labor with android labor. This would lead to technological unemployment.
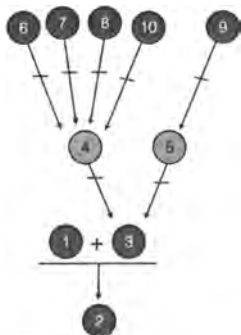
161

technology driving that replacement is advancing at a rapid rate; if it is built on a technological infrastructure that allows for "winner takes all" markets; and if ultimately it could lead to the development of human-like androids, then there is indeed reason to think that technological unemployment could happen.

Since this will lead to a significant restructuring of human society, we should think seriously about its implications. At least, that's how I see it right now. But perhaps I am wrong? There are a number of hedges in the argument—we're predicting the future after all. Maybe technology will not outpace human ingenuity? Maybe we will always create new job opportunities? Maybe these forces will grind capitalism to a halt?

What do you think?

Capitalism, Not Technological Unemployment, is The Problem

Kevin Carson (2014)

At *Slate*, Will Oremus raises the question "What if techno-logical innovation is a job-killer after all?" Rather than being "the cure for economic doldrums," he writes, auto-mation "may destroy more jobs than it creates":

> *Tomorrow's software will diagnose your diseases, write your news stories, and even drive your car. When even high-skill "knowledge workers" are at risk of being replaced by machines, what human jobs will be left? Politics, perhaps— and, of course, entrepreneurship and management. The rich will get richer, in other words, and the rest of us will be left behind.* ("The New Luddites," August 6)

It's a common scenario, and one that's utterly wrongheaded. Although Oremus appeals to Keynes' prediction of technological unemployment, the irony is that Keynes thought that was a good thing. Keynes predicted an economy of increasing abundance and leisure in his grandchildren's time, in which the average work week was 15 hours.

Instead, as Nathan Schneider points out ("Who Stole the Four-Hour Workday?" *Vice*, Aug. 5), US government policy since FDR's time has been to promote "full em-ployment" at a standard 40-hr week. Both major parties, in their public rhetoric, are all about "jobs, jobs, jobs!"

This fixation on creating more work is what Bastiat, in the 19th century, called "Sisyphism" (after the lucky man in Hell who was fully employed rolling a giant rock

up a hill for all eternity). We see the same ideological assumptions—as Mike Masnick argues in the same article where I got the Bastiat reference ("New Report Challenges The Whole 'IP Intensive Industries Are Doing Well Because Of Strong IP' Myth," *Techdirt*, Aug. 8)—displayed in arguments that strong "intellectual property" law is necessary for creating jobs and guaranteeing income for creators.

The idea is that we either impose artificial inefficiencies on technologies of abundance in order to increase the amount of labor ("jobs!") required to produce a given standard of living, or we enclose those technologies to make their output artificially expensive so that everyone has to work longer hours to pay for them, so the increased price can go to paying wages for all those people running on conveyor belts and rat wheels.

Make sense?

Either way, it amounts to hobbling the efficiency of new technology so that everyone has to work longer and harder than necessary in order to meet their needs. This approach is both Schumpeterian and Hamiltonian. Schumpeter saw the large corporation as "progressive" even when large size wasn't technically necessary for efficient production because, with its monopoly power, it could afford to fund expensive R&D and pass the cost on to consumers via cost-plus markup and administered pricing (basically like a regulated monopoly or Pentagon contractor).

Mid-20th century liberalism, essentially a managerialist ideology that lionized large, hierarchical, bureaucratic organizations, extended this approach: the giant corpora-

tion could afford to pay high wages and maintain an employer-based welfare state, and still collect a guaranteed profit, because of its monopoly power.

Modern Hamiltonianism seeks to *prevent* price implosion from radical technological improvements in efficiency, and instead to *guarantee* inflated demands for both capital and labor—by imposing artificial inefficiency when necessary—so that returns on venture capital and full-time employment both remain stable.

The most egregious example is Jaron Lanier's argument that every bit of content anyone produces on the Web should be under strong copyright, so everyone can get paid for everything. But why stop there? Why not monetize the entire economy and force it into the cash nexus? Turn every single thing done by anybody into a "job," so that members of a household get paid wages for mowing the lawn, washing the dishes, or vacuuming the living room. We could increase the nominal work week to 100 hours and per capita income to $100,000. That way, nobody would be able to obtain anything outside the cash nexus. They'd have to have a source of paid income to get the money to pay for anything they consumed—even a beer out of the fridge.

Ironically, that's the strategy European colonial powers used in Africa and the rest of the Third World to force native populations into the wage labor market and make it impossible to subsist comfortably without wage employment. They imposed a head tax that could only be paid in money, which meant that people who had previously been feeding, clothing, and sheltering themselves in the customary economy were forced to go to

work for wages (working for European colonial overseers who had appropriated their land, of course) in order to pay the tax.

It's utterly stupid. The whole point of the economy is not jobs, but consumption. The point of human effort itself is consumption. The less effort required to produce a unit of consumption, the better. When a self-employed subsistence farmer figures out a way to produce the food she consumes with half as many hours of labor as before, she doesn't lament having less work. That's because she internalizes all the benefits of her increased productivity. And when people are free to internalize both all the costs and all the benefits of increased productivity, so that improvements in efficiency are translated directly into lower prices or shorter working hours, they have an incentive to be more productive and work less.

The problem arises, not from the increased efficiency, but from the larger structure of power relations in which the increase in efficiency takes place. When artificial land titles, monopolies, cartels, and "intellectual property" are used by corporations to enclose increased productivity as a source of rents, instead of letting them be socialized by free competition and diffusion of technique, we no longer internalize the fruits of technological advance in the form of lower prices and leisure. We get technological unemployment.

But technological unemployment and the rich getting richer are symptoms, not of the progress itself, but of the capitalistic framework of state-enforced artificial property rights and privilege within which it takes place. The economic ruling classes act through their

state to intervene in the economy, to erect toll-gates, and impede free market competition, so we have to work harder and longer than necessary in order to feed them in addition to ourselves.

So let's not get rid of the technology.

Let's get rid of the capitalists and their state that robs us of its full fruits.

The David Autor Series

John Danaher (2015)

I: Why Haven't Robots Taken Our Jobs? The Complementarity Argument

You've probably noticed the trend. The doomsayers are yelling once more. They are telling us that technology poses a threat to human employment—that the robots are coming for our jobs.

This is a thesis that has been defended in several academic papers, popular books, and newspaper articles. It has been propounded by leading figures in the tech industry, and repeatedly debated and analysed in the media (particularly new media).

But is it right?

Last year I presented a lengthy analysis of the pro-technological unemployment from Brynjolfsson and McAfee. Their book, *The Second Machine Age*, is at the forefront of the current doomsaying trend. In it, they make a relatively simple argument. It starts with the observation that machines are able to displace more and more human labour. It adds to this the claim that while in the past humans have always found other sources of employment, this may no longer be possible because the *pace* and *scope* of current technological advance is such that humans may have *nowhere left to go.*

Recently, Brynjolfsson and McAfee's thesis has attracted the attention of their economic brethren.

Indeed, the *Journal of Economic Perspectives* has just run a short symposium on the topic. One of the contributors to that symposium was David Autor, who wrote an interesting and sober analysis of the impact of technology on employment entitled "Why Are There Still So Many Jobs? The history and future of workplace automation." Autor doesn't deny the impact of technology on employment, but he doesn't quite share Brynjolfsson and McAfee's pessimism.

He makes three main arguments.

Complementarity: Most doomsaying discussions of technology and work focus on the *substitution effect*, i.e. the ways in which technology can substitute for labour. In doing so, they frequently ignore the *complementarity effect*, i.e. the ways in which technology can complement and actually increase the demand for human labour.

Polarisation: Recent technological advances, particularly in computerisation, have facilitated the polarisation of the labour market. Demand for skilled but routine labour has fallen, while demand for lower skilled personal service work, and highly educated creative work has risen. This has also facilitated rising income inequality.

Comparative Advantage: The polarisation effect is unlikely to continue much further into the future. Machines will continue to replace routine and codifiable labour, but this will amplify the comparative advantage that humans have in creative, problem-solving labour.

Through these three arguments, we see how Autor's paints a nuanced picture of the relationship between work and technology. The robots aren't quite going to take over, but they will have an impact. I want to try

explain and assess all three of Autor's arguments over the next few posts.

I start today by delving deeper into the complementarity argument.

1. Autor's Challenge

Anyone with even a passing interest in the history of workplace automation will be familiar with the Luddites, particularly since the term *luddite* has passed into popular usage. The Luddites were a movement—made up of textile workers and weavers—in the early days of the industrial revolution. They went about sabotaging machines in textile factories (such as power looms), which they perceived as a threat to their skilled labour. Although their concerns were real, many now look back on the Luddites as a naive and fundamentally misconceived movement.

The Luddites feared that machines would rob them of employment, and while that may have been true for them in the short term, it was not indicative of a broader trend. The number of jobs has not dramatically declined in the intervening 200 years. What the Luddites missed was the fact that displacement of humans by labour-saving technologies in one domain could actually increase aggregate demand and open up opportunity for employment in other domains.

Agriculture provides a clear illustration of this phenomenon. There is very clear evidence for a *substitution* effect in agriculture.

As Autor notes:

In 1900, 41% of the US workforce was employed in

*agriculture; by 2000, that share had fallen to 2% (Autour
2014), mostly due to a wide range of technologies including
automated machinery.* (Autour 2014, 5)

And yet despite this clear evidence of a substitution
effect, we haven't witnessed a rise in long-term structural
unemployment. This despite the fact that other industries
have witnessed similar forms of substitution. Autor thinks
that this should be puzzling to those like Brynjolfsson and
McAfee who think that technology could lead to long-
term structural unemployment.

This gives rise to what I call Autor's Challenge.
*Given that these technologies demonstrably succeed in their
labor saving objective and, moreover, that we invent many
more labor-saving technologies all the time, should we not be
somewhat surprised that technological change hasn't already
wiped out employment for the vast majority of workers?
Why doesn't automation necessarily reduce aggregate
employment, even as it demonstrably reduces labor require-
ments per unit of output produced?* (Autor 2015, 6)

In other words, before we start harping on about
robots stealing our jobs *in the future*, we should try to
explain why they haven't *already* stolen our jobs. If we can
do this, we might have a better handle on the future trends.

2. The Complementarity Effect
Autor thinks that the explanation lies in the complemen-
tarity effect.

This effect adds some complexity to our under-
standing of the relationship between labour and technol-
ogy. The previously-mentioned substitution effect
supposes that the relationship between a human worker

Employment Polarization in the U.S.: Changes in Employment by Major Occupation, 1979–2012

100 × log Change in Employment

Legend: 1979–1989, 1989–1999, 1999–2007, 2007–2012

Occupations: Personal care, Food/cleaning service, Protective service, Operators/laborers, Production, Office/admin, Sales, Technicians, Professionals, Managers

Autor, 2015

172
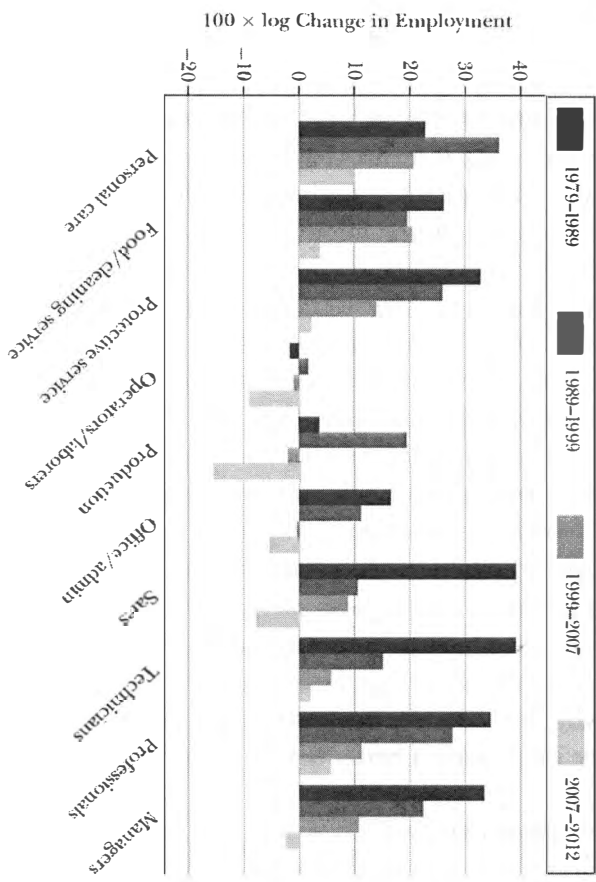
and a robot/machine is, in essence, a zero-sum game. Once the machine can do the job better than the human, it takes over and the human loses out. The complementarity effect supposes that the relationship can be more like a positive-sum game, i.e. it might be that as the robot gets better, no one really loses out and everyone gains.

Many jobs are complex. Several different inputs (involving different skills and aptitudes) are required to produce the overall economic or social value. Consider the job of a lawyer. They must have a good working knowledge of the law, they must be able to use legal research databases, they must be able to craft legal argument, meet with and advise clients, schmooze and socialise with them if needs be, negotiate settlements with other lawyers, manage their time effectively, and so on. Each of these constitutes an input that contributes to their overall economic value.

They all *complement each other*: the better you are at all of these things, the more economic value you produce. Now, oftentimes these inputs are subject to specialisation and differentiation within a given law firm. One lawyer will focus on schmoozing, another on negotiation, another on research and case strategy. This specialisation can be a positive sum game (as Adam Smith famously pointed out): the law firm's productivity can greatly increase despite the specialisation. This is because it is the sum of the parts, not the individual parts, that matters.

This is important when it comes to understanding the impact of technology on labour. To date, most technologies are narrow and specialised. They substitute or replace humans performing routine, specialised tasks.

But since the economic value of any particularly work process tends to be produced by a set of complementary inputs, and not just a specialised task, it does not follow that this will lead to less employment for human beings. Instead, humans can switch to the complementary tasks, often benefitting from the efficiency gains associated with machine substitution. Indeed, the lower costs and increased output in one specialised domain can increase labour in other complementary domains.

Autor illustrates the complementarity effect by using the example of ATMs and bank tellers. ATMs were widely introduced to American banking in the 1970s, with the total number increasing from 100,000 to 400,000 in the period from 1995 to 2010 alone. ATMs substitute for human bank tellers in many routine cash-handling tasks. But this has not led to a decrease in bank teller employment. On the contrary, the total number of (human) bank tellers increased from 500,000 to 550,000 between 1980 and 2010. That admittedly represents a fall in percentage share of workforce, but it is still surprising to see the numbers rise given the huge increase in the numbers of ATMs. Why haven't bank tellers been obliterated?

The answer lies in complementarity. Routine cash-handling is only one part of what provides the economic value. Another significant part is relationship management—i.e. forging and maintaining relationships with customers—and solving their problems. Humans are good at that part of the job and hence they have switched to fulfilling this role.

Increasingly, banks recognized the value of tellers enabled by

information technology, not primarily as checkout clerks, but as salespersons, forging relationships with customers and introducing them to additional bank services like credit cards, loans, and investment products. (Autor 2015, 7)

Thus, complementarity protected human employment from technological displacement. Indeed, Autor argues that it may even have improved things for these workers as their new roles required higher educational attainment and attracted better pay. The efficiency gains in one domain could consequently facilitate a positive sum outcome.

It is worth summarising Autor's argument. The following is not formally valid, but captures the gist of the idea:

1. *Many work processes draw upon complementary inputs, whereby increases in one input facilitates or requires increases in another, in order to generate economic value.*
2. *In many cases, technology can substitute for some of these inputs but not all.*
3. *Humans are often good at fulfilling the complementary, non-substituted roles because those roles rely on hard-to-automate skills.*
4. *Thus, even in cases of widespread technological substitution, the demand for human labour is not always reduced.*

How does this chain of reasoning stack up?

3. Threats to the Complementarity Effect
There is certainly something to it: work processes clearly do rely upon complementary inputs to generate economic value. There is plenty of room for positive sum interactions between humans and robots. But it is not all

a bed of roses. Autor himself acknowledges that there are three factors that modulate the scale and beneficial impact of the complementarity effect. They are

Capacity for complementarity: In order to benefit from the complementarity effect, workers must be able to perform the complementary roles. If workers are only capable of performing the substitutable role, they will not benefit. For instance, it is possible (maybe even likely) that many bank tellers were not good at relationship management. They undoubtedly lost their jobs to ATMs (or saw their roles diminished and pay packets cut).

Elasticity of labour supply: Elasticity is an economic concept used to describe how responsive demand or supply is to changes in other phenomena (usually price). Elasticity of labour supply refers to how much the supply of labour increases (or decreases) in response to changes in the price demanded for labour. This modulates complementarity in the following way: Workers capable of fulfilling the complementary roles may not benefit from the increased demand for their labour if it is possible for other workers to flood the market and fulfil complementary tasks. This may have happened with the rise in lower paid personal service workers in the wake of computerisation in the late 20th century. I'll talk about this more in the next entry.

Output elasticity of demand and income elasticity of demand: This refers to how much demand for a particular product or service increases or decreases in response to increases in productivity and income. In essence, if there is more of a product or service being supplied, and people have more money that they can spend

on that product or service, will demand actually go up?

The answer varies and this affects the impact of technology on employment. In the case of agricultural produce, demand probably won't go up. There is only so much food and drink people require each day. This likely explains why the percentage of household income spent on food has steadily declined over the past century despite huge technologically-assisted gains in agricultural productivity.

Contrariwise, demand for healthcare has dramatically increased in the same period, despite the fact that this is in an area that has also witnessed huge technologically-assisted gains in productivity. Why? Because people want to be healthier (or avoid disease) and this is a sufficiently fuzzy concept to facilitate increased demand.

This last factor is crucial and provides another part of the response to Autor's challenge.

Part of the reason why there are still so many jobs is that people's demands don't remain static over time. On the contrary, their consumption demands usually increase along with increases in income and productivity. Autor provides an arresting illustration of this. He argues that an average US worker living in 2015 could match the standard of living of the average worker in 1915 by simply working for 17 weeks a year. So why do they work for so much longer? Because they're not satisfied with that standard of living: they've tasted the possibility of more and they want it.

Something strikes me about this analysis of technology and employment. The complementarity effect is, no doubt, real. But its ability to sustain demand for human

labour in the medium-to-long term seems to depend on one crucial assumption: that technology will remain a narrow, domain-specific phenomenon. That there will always be this complementary space for human workers. But what if we can create general artificial intelligence? What if robot workers are not limited to routine, narrowly-defined tasks? In that case, they could fill the complementary roles too, thereby negating the increased demand for human workers. Indeed, this was one of the central theses of Brynjolfsson and McAfee's book. They were concerned about the impact of exponential and synergistic technological advances on human employment. They would argue that Autor's lack of pessimism is driven by a misplaced fealty to historical patterns.

Think about it this way. Suppose there are ten complementary inputs required for a particular work process. A hundred years ago all ten inputs were provided by human workers. Ninety years ago machines were invented that could provide two of these inputs. That was fine: humans could switch to one or more of the remaining eight inputs.

Then, fifty years ago, more machines were invented. They could provide two more of the inputs. Humans were limited to the remaining six, but they were happy with this because there was increased demand for those inputs and they paid better. All was good.

But then, a few years ago, somebody invented new machines that not only replaced four more of the inputs, but also did a better job than the older machines on the four previously-replaced inputs. Suddenly there were only two places left for human labour to go. But still people

were happy because these roles were the most highly skilled and commanded the highest incomes. The complementarity effect continued to hold.

 Now, fast forward into the future.

Suppose somebody invents a general machine learning algorithm that fulfills the final two roles and can be integrated with all the pre-existing machines. A technological apotheosis of sorts has arrived: the technological advances of the past hundred years have all come together and can now completely replace the ten human inputs. People didn't realise this would happen: they were tricked by the historical pattern. They assumed technology would only replace one or two inputs and that they could fill the complementary space. They neglected both the combined impact of technology, and the possibility of exponential growth.

That was the type of scenario Brynjolfsson and McAfee were warning us about and it seems unaffected by Autor's claims for the complementarity effect. To link it back to the argument presented in the previous section, it seems like the possibility of general machine intelligence (and/or the synergistic effects of many technological advances) could cast premise 2 into doubt.

To be fair to him, Autor has a response (of sorts) to this. He is sceptical about the prospects for general machine intelligence and the likelihood of machine learning having a significant displacement effect. This features heavily in his defence of the comparative advantage argument. I'll be looking at that in a future entry.

II: Automation and Income Inequality: Understanding the Polarisation Effect

Inequality is now a major topic of concern. Only those with their heads firmly buried in the sand could fail to notice the rising chorus of concern about wealth inequality over the past couple of years. From the economic tomes of Thomas Piketty and Tony Atkinson, to the battlecries of the 99%, and on to the political successes of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Bernie Sanders in the US, the notion that inequality is a serious social and political problem seems to have captured the popular imagination.

In the midst of all this, a standard narrative has emerged. We were all fooled by the triumphs of capitalism in the 20th century. The middle part of the 20th century—from roughly the end of WWII to 1980—saw significant economic growth and noticeable reductions in inequality. We thought this could last forever: that growth and equality could go hand in hand. But this was an aberration. Since 1980 the trend has reversed. We are now returning to levels of inequality not seen since the late 19th century. The 1% of the 1% is gaining an increasing share of the wealth.

What role does technology have to play in this standard narrative? No doubt, there are lots of potential explanations of the recent trend, but many economists agree that technology has played a crucial role. This is true even of economists who are sceptical of the more alarmist claims about robots and unemployment. David Autor is one such economist.

As I noted in my previous entry, Autor is sceptical of

authors like Brynjolfsson and McAfee who predict an increase in automation-induced structural unemployment. But he is not sceptical about the dramatic effects of automation on employment patterns and income distribution.

In fact, Autor argues that automating technologies have led to a *polarisation effect*—actually, two polarisation effects. These can be characterised in the following manner.

Occupational Polarisation Effect: Growth in automating technologies has facilitated the polarisation of the labour market, such that people are increasingly being split between to two main categories of work: (i) manual and (ii) abstract.

Wage Polarisation Effect: For a variety of reasons, and contrary to some theoretical predictions, this occupational polarisation effect has also led to an increase in wage inequality.

1. Is there an occupational polarisation effect?

The evidence for an occupational polarisation effect is reasonably compelling. To appreciate it, and to understand why it happened, we need to consider the different types of work that people engage in, and the major technological changes over the past thirty years. Work is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Any attempt to reduce it to a few simple categories will do violence to the complexity of the real world. But we have to engage in some simplifying categorisations to make sense of things. To that end, Autor thinks we can distinguish between three main categories of work in modern

industrial societies.

Routine Work: This consists of tasks that can be codified and reduced to a series of step-by-step rules or procedures. Such tasks are

> *characteristic of many middle-skilled cognitive and manual activities: for example, the mathematical calculations involved in simple bookkeeping; the retrieving, sorting and storing of structured information typical of clerical work; and the precise executing of a repetitive physical operation in an unchanging environment as in repetitive production tasks* (Autor 2015, 11).

Abstract Work: These are tasks that "require problem-solving capabilities, intuition, creativity and persuasion." Such tasks are characteristic of "professional, technical, and managerial occupations" that "employ workers with high levels of education and analytical capability," placing "a premium on inductive reasoning, communications ability, and expert mastery" (Autor 2015, 12).

Manual Work: These are tasks "requiring situational adaptability, visual and language recognition, and in-person interactions." Such tasks are characteristic of "food preparation and serving jobs, cleaning and janitorial work, grounds cleaning and maintenance, in-person health assistance by home health aides, and numerous jobs in security and protective services." These jobs employ people "who are physically adept, and, in some cases, able to communicate fluently in spoken language" but would generally be classified as "low-skilled" (Autor 2015, 12).

This threefold division makes sense. I certainly find it instructive to classify myself along these lines. I may be wrong, but think it would be fair to classify myself (an

academic) as an abstract worker, insofar as the primary tasks within my job (research and teaching) require problem-solving ability, creativity, and persuasion, though there are certainly aspects of my job that involve routine and manual tasks too. But this simply helps to underscore one of Autor's other points: most work processes are made up of multiple, often complementary, inputs, even when one particular class of inputs tends to dominate.

This threefold division helps to shine light on the polarising effect of technology over the past thirty years. The major growth area in technology over that period of time has been in computerisation and information technology. Indeed, the growth in that sector has been truly astounding (exponential in certain respects). We would expect such astronomical growth to have some effect on employment patterns, but that effect would depend on the answer to a critical question: what it is that computers are good at?

The answer, of course, is that computers are good at performing routine tasks. Computerised systems run on algorithms, which are encoded step-by-step instructions for taking an input and producing an output. Growth in the sophistication of such systems, and reductions in their cost, create huge incentives for businesses to use computerised systems to replace routine workers. Since those workers (e.g. manufacturers, clerical and admin staff) traditionally represented the middle-skill level of the labour market, the net result has been a polarisation effect. People are forced into either manual (low-skill) or abstract (high skill) work. Now, the big question is whether automation will eventually displace workers in

those categories too, but to date manual and abstract work have remained difficult to automate, hence the polarisation.

As I said at the outset, the evidence for this occupational polarisation effect is reasonably compelling. The diagram in *figure 2*, taken directly from Autor's article, illustrates the effect in the US labour market from the late 1970s up to 2012. It depicts the percentage change in employment across ten different categories of work. The three categories on the left represent manual work, the three in the middle represent routine work, and the four on the right represent abstract work.

As you can see, growth in routine work has either been minimal (bearing in mind the population increase) or negative, whereas growth in abstract and manual work has been much higher (though there have been some recent reversals, probably due to the Great Recession, and maybe due to other recent advances in automating technologies, though this is less certain).

Similar evidence is available for a polarization effect in EU countries, but I'll leave you read Autor's article for that.

2. Has this led to increased wage inequality?
Increasing polarisation with respect to the types of work that we do need not lead to an increase in wage inequality. Indeed, certain theoretical assumptions might lead us to predict otherwise. As discussed in a previous post, increased levels of automation can sometimes give rise to a *complementarity effect*. This happens when the gains from automation in one type of work process also translate into gains

for workers engaged in complementary types of work.

So, for instance, automation of manufacturing processes might increase demand for skilled maintenance workers, which should technically increase the price they can obtain for their labour. This means that even if the labour-force has bifurcated into two main categories of work—one of which is traditionally classed as low-skill and the other of which is traditionally classed as high-skill—it does not follow that we would necessarily see an increase in income inequality.

On the contrary, both categories of workers might be expected to see an increase in income.

But this theoretical argument depends on a crucial 'all else being equal'-clause. In this respect it has good company: many economic arguments depends on such clauses. The reality is that all else is not equal. Abstract and manual workers have not seen complementary gains in income. On the contrary: the evidence we have seems to suggest that abstract workers have seen consistent increases in income, while manual workers have not. The evidence here is more nuanced. According to data collected by Autor, there has been an income polarisation effect, with mean incomes going up for high skilled workers and down for low skilled and middle-skilled workers since 1979.

Complementarity effects of information technology benefit abstract workers more than manual workers: As defined above, abstract work is analytical, problem-solving, creative and persuasive. Most abstract workers rely heavily on "large bodies of constantly evolving expertise: for example, medical knowledge, legal precedents, sales

data, financial analysis" and so on (Autor 2015, 15). Computerisation greatly eases our ability to access such bodies of knowledge. Consequently, the dramatic advances in computerisation have strongly complemented the tasks being performed by abstract workers (though it has also forced abstract workers to perform more and more of their own routine administrative tasks).

Demand for the outputs abstract workers seems to be relatively elastic: Elasticity is a measure of how responsive some economic variable (demand/supply) is to changes in other variables (e.g. price). If demand for abstract work were inelastic, then we would not expect advances in computerisation to fuel significant increases in the numbers of abstract workers. But in fact we see the opposite. Demand for such workers has gone up. Autor suggests that healthcare workers are the best examples of this: demand for healthcare workers has increased despite significant advances in healthcare-related technologies.

There are greater barriers to entry into the labour market for abstract work: This is an obvious one, but worth stressing. Most abstract work requires high levels of education, training, and credentialing (for both good and bad reasons). It is not that easy for displaced workers to transition into those types of work. Conversely, manual work tends not to require high levels of education and training. It is relatively easy for displaced workers to transition to these types of work. The result is an oversupply of manual labour, which depresses wages.

The bottom line is this: abstract workers have tended to benefit from the displacement of routine work

with higher wages; manual workers have not. The net result is a wage polarisation effect.

3. Conclusion

There has been a lot of hype and media interest in the *Rise of The Robots*. This hype and interest has often been conveyed through alarmist headlines like *the robots are coming for our jobs* and so on. While this *is interesting*, and worthy of scrutiny, it is not the only interesting or important thing. Even if technology does not lead to a long-term reduction in the number of jobs, it may nevertheless have a significant impact on employment patterns and income distribution. The evidence presented by Autor bears this out.

One final point before I wrap up. It is worth bearing in mind that the polarisation effects described in this post are only concerned with types of work and wage inequalities affected by technology. Wage and wealth inequality are much broader phenomena and have been exacerbated by other factors. I would recommend reading Piketty or Atkinson for more information about these broader phenomena.

III: Polanyi's Paradox: Will humans maintain any advantage over machines?

There is no denying that improvements in technology allow machines to perform tasks once performed best by humans. This is at the heart of the technological displacement we see throughout the economy. The key question

going forward is whether humans will maintain an advantage in any cognitive or physical activity. The answer to this question will determine whether the future of the economy is one in which humans continue to play a relevant part, or one in which humans are left behind.

To help us answer this question it is worth considering the paradoxes of technological improvement. It is truly amazing that advances in artificial intelligence have allowed machines to beat humans at cognitive games like chess or *Jeopardy!*, or that cars can now drive around complex environments without human assistance.

At the same time, it is strange that other physical and cognitive skills have been less easy for machines to master, e.g. natural language processing or dextrous physical movements (like running over rough terrain). It seems paradoxical that technology could be so good at some things and so bad at others.

Technologists and futurists have long remarked on these paradoxes. *Moravec's paradox* is a famous example. Writing back in the late 80s, Hans Moravec (among others) noted the oddity in the fact that high-level reasoning took relatively few computational resources to replicate, whereas low-level sensorimotor skills took far more. Of course, we have seen exponential growth in computational resources in the intervening 30 years, so much so that the drain on computational resources may no longer be an impediment to machine takeover of these tasks. But there are other problems.

This brings us to the (very closely related) Polanyi's Paradox, named in honour of the philosopher and polymath Michael Polanyi, who wrote, back in 1966, a

book called *The Tacit Dimension*, which examined the tacit dimension to human knowledge. It argued that, to a large extent, human knowledge and capability relied on skills and rulesets that are often beneath our conscious appreciation (transmitted to us via culture, tradition, evolution, and so on). The thesis of the book was summarised in the slogan *We can know more than we can tell.*

Economist David Autor likes Polanyi's Paradox (indeed I think he is the one who named it such). He uses it to argue that humans are likely to retain some advantages over machines for the foreseeable future.

But in saying this Autor must confront the wave of technological optimism suggesting that advances in machine learning and robotics are likely to overcome Moravec and Polanyi's Paradoxes. And confront it he does, arguing that neither of these technological developments is as impressive as it seems and that the future is still bright for human economic relevance.

I think he might be wrong about this (though this doesn't make the future "dark" or "grim"). In the remainder of this post, I explain why.

1. Two Ways of Overcoming Polanyi's Paradox

The first thing I need to do is provide a more detailed picture of Autor's argument.

Autor's claim is that there are two strategies that technologists can use to overcome Polanyi's Paradox, but if we look to the current empirical realities of these two strategies we see that they are far more limited than you might think.

Consequently, the prospects of machine takeover are

more limited than some are claiming, and certain forms of machine-complementary human labour are likely to remain relevant in the future.

I'm going to go through each step in this argument. I'll start by offering a slightly more precise characterisation of Polanyi's Paradox:

Polanyi's Paradox: We can know more than we can tell, i.e. many of the tasks we perform rely on tacit, intuitive knowledge that is difficult to codify and automate.

I didn't say this in the introduction but I don't like referring to this as a paradox since it doesn't involve any direct self-contradiction. It is, as Autor himself notes, a *constraint* on the ease of automation. The question is whether this constraint can be bypassed by technological advances.

Autor claims that there are two routes around the constraint, both of which have been and currently are being employed by engineers and technologists. They are:

Environmental Control: You control and manipulate the environment in such a way that it is easier for machines to perform the task. This route around the constraint acknowledges that one of the major problems for machines is their relative inflexibility in complex environments. They tend to follow relatively simple routines and cannot easily adapt to environmental changes. One solution to this is to simplify the environment.

Machine Learning: You try to get the machine to mimic expert human judgment (which often relies on tacit knowledge and heuristics). You do this by using bottom-up machine-learning techniques instead of top-down programming. The latter require the programmer to pre-define the ruleset the computer will use when

completing the task; the former gets the computer to infer its own rules from a series of trials on a large dataset.

We are all familiar with examples of both methods, even if we are occasionally unaware of them. For instance, a classic example of environmental control is the construction of roads for automobiles (or train-tracks for trains). Both have the effect of smoothing out complex environments in order to facilitate machine-based transport. Machine learning is a more recent phenomenon, but is used everywhere in the Big Data economy, from your Facebook newsfeed to Netflix recommendations.

Hopefully, you can see how both methods are used to bypass Polanyi's Paradox: the first one does so by adapting the environment to fit the relative 'stupidity' of the machine; the second one does so by adapting the machine to the complexity of the environment.

2. The Limitations of Both Approaches

This brings us to the next step in Autor's argument: the claim that neither method is as impressive or successful as we might be inclined to think. One reason why we might think Polanyi's Paradox is a temporary roadblock is because we are impressed by the rapid advances in technology over the past thirty years, and we are convinced that exponential growth in computing power, speed, and so forth is likely to continue. Autor doesn't deny these advances, but is more sceptical about their long-term potential.

He defends this argument by considering some of the leading examples of environmental control and machine learning. Let's start with environmental control

and take the example of Amazon's Kiva robots. As you may know, Amazon bought Kiva Systems in 2012 in order to take full advantage of their warehousing robots.

Kiva robots work in an interesting way. They are not as physically dextrous as human workers. They cannot navigate through the traditional warehouse environment, pick items off shelves, and fill customer orders.

Instead, they work on simplifying the environment and complementing the work of human collaborators. Kiva robots don't transport or carry *stock* through the warehouse: they transfer shelving units. When stock comes into the warehouse, the Kiva robots bring empty shelving units to a loading area. Once in the loading area, the shelves are stocked by human workers and then transported back by the robots. When it comes time to fill an order, the process works in reverse: the robots fetch the loaded shelves, and bring them back to the humans, who pick the items off the shelf, and put them in boxes for shipping (though it should be noted that humans are assisted in this task by dispatch software that tells them which items belong in which box).

The upshot is that the Kiva robots are limited to the simple task of moving shelving units across a level surface. The environment in which they work is simple.

According to Autor, something similar is true of the much-lauded self-driving car. Google's car does not drive on roads: it drives on maps. It works by comparing real-time sensory data with maps constructed to include the exact locations of obstacles and signaling systems and so forth. If there is a pedestrian, vehicle, or other hazard, the car responds by *braking, turning, and stopping*. If some-

thing truly unexpected happens (like a detour), the human has to take over. In short, the car requires simplified environments and is less adaptive than it may seem.

While he's a little less example-driven in this part, Autor pours similar amounts of cold water on the machine learning revolution. He focuses on describing how machine learning works and then discusses a smattering of examples: search recommendations from Google, movie recommendations from Netflix, IBM's Watson. I'm going to quote him in full here so you can get a sense of how he argues the point:

> *My general observation is that the tools* [i.e. machine learning algorithms] *are inconsistent: uncannily accurate at times; typically only so-so; and occasionally unfathomable… IBM's Watson computer famously triumphed in the trivia game of Jeopardy against champion human opponents. Yet Watson also produced a spectacularly incorrect answer during its winning match. Under the category of US Cities, the question was, 'Its largest airport was named for a World War II hero; its second largest, for a World War II battle.' Watson's proposed answer was Toronto, a city in Canada. Even leading-edge accomplishments in this domain can appear somewhat underwhelming…* (Autor 2015, 26).

He goes on then to note that we are still in the early days of this technology—some are bullish about the prospects, others are not—but he thinks there may still be "fundamental problems" with the systems being developed:

> *Since the underlying technologies—the software, hardware, and training data—are all improving rapidly (Andrespouos and Tsotsos 2013), one should view these examples as*

prototypes rather than as mature products. Some researchers expect that as computing power rises and training databases grow, the brute force machine learning approach will approach or exceed human capabilities. Others suspect that machine learning will only ever get it right on average, while missing many of the most important and informative exceptions… Machine-learning algorithms may have fundamental problems with reasoning about 'purposiveness' and intended uses, even given an arbitrarily large training database…(Grabner, Gall, and Van Gool 2011). One is reminder of Carl Sagan's (1980, p 218) remark, 'If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe.' (Autor 2015, 26)

Again, the upshot being that the technology is more limited than we might think. He goes on to say that there will continue to be a range of skilled jobs that require human flexibility and adaptability and that they will continue to complement the rise of the machines. His go-to example is that of a medical support technician (e.g. radiology technician, nurse technician, phlebotomist).

These kinds of jobs require physical dexterity, decent knowledge of mathematics and life sciences, and analytical reasoning skills. The problem, as he sees it, is not so much the continuing relevance of these jobs but the fact that our educational systems (and here he is speaking of the US) are not well set-up to provide training for these kinds of workers.

3. Is Autor Right?

As I mentioned at the outset, I'm not convinced by Autor's arguments. There are four main reasons for this.

The first is simply that I'm not sure that he's convinced either. It seems to me that his arguments in relation to machine learning are pretty weak and speculative. He acknowledges that the technology is improving rapidly but then clings to one potential limitation (the possible fundamental problem with purposiveness) to dampen enthusiasm. But even there he acknowledges that this is something that only "may" be true. So, as I say, I'm not sure that even he would bet on this limitation.

Second, and more importantly, I have worries about the style of argument he employs. I agree that predictions about future technologies should be grounded in empirical realities, but there are always dangers when it comes to drawing inferences from those realities to the future. The simplest one—and one that many futurists will be inclined to push—is that Autor's arguments may come from a failure to understand the exponential advances in technology.

Autor is unimpressed by what he sees, but what he sees are advances from the relatively linear portion of an exponential growth curve. Once we get into the exponential takeoff phase, things will be radically different. Part of the problem here also has to do with how he emphasises and interprets recent developments in technology. When I look at Kiva robots, or the self-driving car, or IBM's Watson, I'm pretty impressed. I think it is amazing that technology can do these things, particularly given that in the not-too-distant past such things were considered impossible for machines. With that in mind, I think it would be foolish to make claims about future limitations based on current ones.

Obviously, Autor doesn't quite see it that way.

Where I might argue that his view is based on a faulty inductive inference; he might argue (I'm putting words in his mouth, perhaps unfairly) that mine is unempirical, overly-optimistic, and faith-based. If it all boils down to interpretation and best-guess inferences, who is to say who's right?

This brings me to my third point, which is that there may be some reason to doubt Autor's interpretation if it is based (implicitly or otherwise) on faulty assumptions about machine replacement. And I think it is. Autor seems to assume that if machines are not as flexible and adaptable as we are, they won't fully replace us. In short, that if they are not like us, we will maintain some advantage over them. I think this ignores the advantages of non-human-likeness in robot/machine design.

This is something that Jerry Kaplan discusses quite nicely in his recent book *Humans Need Not Apply*. Kaplan makes the point that you need four things to accomplish any task: (i) sensory data; (ii) energy; (iii) reasoning ability, and (iv) actuating power. In human beings, all four of these things have been integrated into one biological unit (the brain-body complex). In robots, these things can be distributed across large environments: teams of smart devices can provide the sensory data; reasoning and energy can be centralised in server farms or in cloud computing; and signals can be sent out to teams of actuating devices. Kaplan gives the example of a robot painter.

You could imagine a robot painter as a single humanoid object, climbing ladders and applying paint with a brush; or, more likely, you could imagine it as a swarm of drones, applying paint through a spray-on

nozzle, controlled by some centralised or distributed AI programme. The entire distributed system may look nothing like a human worker; but it still replaces what the human used to do. The point here is that when you look at the Kiva robots, you may be unimpressed because they don't look or act like human workers, but they may be merely one component in a larger robotic system that does have the effect of replacing human workers. You draw a faulty inference about technological limitations by assuming the technology will be human-like.

This brings me to my final reason, which may be little more than a redressing of the previous one. In his discussion, Autor appears to treat environmental control and machine learning as independent solutions to Polanyi's Paradox. But I don't see why they have to be independent. Surely they could work together?

Surely, we can simplify the environment and then use data from this simplified environment to train machines to be work smarter in those simplified environments? If such synergy is possible it might further loosen the constraint of Polanyi's Paradox.

In sum, I would not like to exaggerate the potential impacts of technology on employment, but nor would I like to underestimate them. It seems to me that Autor's argument tends toward underestimation.

When Jobs Become Obsolete

Mr. Wilson (2014)

Ideally, we'd like to help people find ways to earn money with less work, but of course that's always a challenge. Fifty years ago, everyone thought that robots would be doing all the work for us and people would be living lives of leisure. That this has not come to pass is surely mankind's biggest tragedy.

–Oliver Benjamin,
Dudely Lama of The Church of the Latter-Day Dude

Over the last few years, many of us have become used to living in an America in which there are roughly four job seekers for each available job. Furthermore, I was recently told that a drop in the unemployment rate these days is just as likely to be caused by people giving up on finding a job as it is by people actually becoming employed. I'm sure that we will eventually get past our current sluggish economy and we will see a new wave of job creation possibly contributed to by the emergence of some exciting new technology. Then perhaps at some point the economy will fall into another slump only to boom again in the future.

Despite these relatively short term ups and downs, is the possibility of a fully employed work force a realistic prospect for the long term future? There was once a time when the US was a country of self-employed farmers and artisans. Due to technological advances, significantly more agricultural output and consumer goods could be produced by fewer people. As of 2008, only 2-3% of the

population were directly employed in agriculture.

That is 2% to 3% of the population now grows the food that feeds the other 97-98%. At the same time the manufacturing sector has seen similar increases in the ability of fewer people with less specialized skills to produce more at a cheaper cost.

Obviously, this has been great for the consumer, though it is probably less so for the parts of the work-force who have seen their crafts dumbed down and made obsolete. The children, grandchildren, and great grand-children of yesterday's farmers and manufacturers are now largely employed in the service sector economy. Some have become engineers, doctors, and lawyers but mostly we are a generation of telemarketers, advertisers, middle managers, salespeople, bank tellers, and private and public sector bureaucrats.

These are the nuts and bolts jobs of an economy where food production is taken care of and where there is little manufacturing of anything of actual value. It is amazing how many people make their money doing nothing more than moving about paper and signatures. Much of this work is tedious, hyper-conformist, and mind-numbing but it is still more comfortable than the lives of our great grandparents on their farms.

These service economy jobs are now also becoming obsolete. Interactions with corporate bureaucracy can now be taken care of by purely automated means. Insur-ance, electric, Internet, and phone bills are paid online or over the phone using purely automated systems. Cashiers at the grocery store are being replaced by purely auto-mated systems.

Furthermore, tasks like buying insurance, taking money in and out of bank accounts, and making travel arrangements are now becoming more automated. There are definitely times when I want to talk with an actual human about my phone or Internet plans but these times are becoming rare and the need for another human to be involved in most transactions is decreasing. Bookstores, record stores, and video stores are now becoming obsolete too and I will miss many of them (though I still enjoy meeting all my media needs from the comfort of my home).

The advent of computers and the Internet has made all this possible. Upcoming advances in robotics and biological engineering will eventually eliminate the need for actual human workers in manufacturing as well as agriculture and medicine.

The way technology is used largely depends on the context it is introduced in. In our current system it has largely been used to make labor more expendable and to enrich ownership and management in the process. What I advocate is using our exponentially-growing technical capacity to become free from dependence on wage labor. Simply put, if we can meet all or nearly all our needs almost without working, why shouldn't we? I don't know what is required to do this. Perhaps alternative currencies, 3d printers, and duplicable information will allow more of us to work, and support ourselves outside of conventional employment.

This could be a step in the right direction.

I personally like the idea that an economy freed from the high overhead burdens and capital concentration, caused by excessive regulation, zoning, licensing,

and corporate subsidies would allow greater numbers of self-employed people or work-at-home employee-owned and -controlled enterprises. In such instances one would be much more likely to keep the rewards and the free time of automating or simplifying one's daily tasks.

But, perhaps more is needed though, maybe some sort of minimum income, or changes in land tenure or some sort of radical restructuring of the economy. Other options include financial rewards for making one's job obsolete or allowing people to keep the earnings and the free time if they automate their position.

All these ideas have their shortcomings, but it seems to me we are a creative enough society to find ways to use our technological capacity to free ourselves from mindless drudgery.

The economy of the future has yet to be determined. Are we moving in a direction where access to resources is further removed from having to work for them? Will machines and computers do all the work allowing humans to focus on their pastimes of choice? Have the conflicting interests of laborers and corporate owners affected the progress to this possible future?

Technology has the ability to eliminate the need for most of us to spend most of our time encumbered by repetitive and unsatisfying drudgery. We could live in a world where all our concerns are taken care of and we are free to pursue the things that truly interest us.

Let's prepare for the inevitable time when jobs become obsolete.

A Response to Nicholas Carr, Part 3

John Danaher (2015)

III: Technological Unemployment and Personal Well-Being: does work make us happy?

Let's assume technological unemployment is going to happen. Let's assume that automating technologies will take over the majority of economically-productive labour. It's a controversial assumption, to be sure, but one with some basis. Should we welcome this possibility? On previous occasions, I have outlined some arguments for thinking that we should. In essence, these arguments claim that if we could solve the distributional problems arising from technological unemployment (e.g. through a basic income guarantee), then freedom from work could be a boon in terms of personal autonomy, well-being, and fulfillment.

But maybe this is wrong. Maybe the absence of work from our lives will make us miserable and unfulfilled? Today, I want to look at an argument in favour of this alternative point of view. The argument comes from Nicholas Carr's recent book on automation. Carr has a bit of a reputation as a technology doomsayer. But I think he sometimes makes some reasonable points. When I first read his argument on work, I didn't think much of it. But upon re-reading, I saw that it is slightly more subtle and interesting than I first supposed.

Carr's argument rests on two main claims: (i) the importance of the *flow* state in human wellbeing; (ii) our

inability to be good judges of what will get us into such flow states. These two claims directly challenge the typical anti-work arguments. Let's see exactly how it all fits together.

1. A Simple Anti-Work Argument

We start by considering the anti-work view, i.e. the one that is opposed to what Carr has to say. I won't consider any particular proponent of this view, though there are many. Instead, I'll consider a simple, generic version of it.

The anti-work view is premised on the notion that work is generally unpleasant and undertaken against our will. Proponents of the view highlight the valorisation and glorification of the work ethic in contemporary capitalist societies. They claim that we have all been duped into making a virtue of an economic necessity. Work is labour undertaken for some economic reward (or hope of such a reward), but we don't really get to choose our preferred form of labour. The market dictates what is economically valuable. If we are lucky, we get to do something we don't hate. But even if we are lucky, we will soon find that work invades our lives. We will spend the majority of our time doing it; and the time that we are not working will be spent recovering from or prepar-ing for it. And it gets even worse. In the modern era, there is a creeping erosion of our leisure time, and a collapse in the possibility of achieving a work-life balance. Communications technologies mean that we are always contactable, always switched on, and always working.

Wouldn't it be so much better if we could remove these work-related pressures from our lives? If machines could take over all economically important labour, we

would be free to spend our time as we wish. We could pursue projects of genuine personal, social, and moral interest. We could rebalance our lives, spending more time at leisure, engaging in what Bob Black has called the "ludic life." Surely, this would be a more healthful, meaningful, and fulfilling existence?

To put all this into a slightly more formal argument,

1. *If we are free to choose how to spend our time (rather than being forced to work for a living), then we will engage in activities that confer greater levels of well being and meaning on our lives.*

2. *If there is technological unemployment, we will be free to spend our time as we please.*

3. *Therefore, if there is technological unemployment, we will be able to engage in activities that confer greater levels of well being, and fulfillment on our lives.*

There are several problems with this argument. For one thing, I suspect that premise 2 is unpersuasive in its present form. The notion that freedom from work will automatically free us up to spend our time as we please sounds naive. As hinted at above, a lack of employment could lead to a severe existential crisis as people need to find resources to meet their basic needs. That might make them even less free than they were before they lost their jobs. Unless that distributional problem can be addressed, premise 2 will be a weak link in the chain of reasoning.

But as I mentioned above, let's assume that this particular issue can be resolved. Focus could then shift to premise 1. This is the one that Carr seems to cast into doubt.

2. The Importance of Flow and the Paradox of Work

Carr's argument centres around the concept of the *flow state*. This is something that was brought to popular attention by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. It is a state of concentration and immersion that is characterised by a strong positive affective experience (sometimes described as "rapture" or "joy"). It is distinct from states of extreme mental concentration that are characterised by negative affective experience. A flow state is something you have probably experienced at some point in your life. I know I sometimes get it while writing.

The interesting thing, from Carr's perspective, is that the flow state seems to be an important component of well being and fulfillment. And, perhaps more importantly, that we aren't very good at identifying the activities that help us to bring it about. This is due to the "paradox of work," which was also described by Csikszentmihalyi.

In a series of experiments, Csikszentmihalyi used something called the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) to gauge what sorts of activities most increased people's feelings of subjective well-being and happiness. The ESM tries to sample experimental subjects' moods at intervals during the course of a typical day. The subjects' wear a device (in the original studies it was a pager) that beeps them at certain times and asks them to complete a short survey. The survey itself asks them to explain what they were doing at that moment in time, what skills they were deploying, the challenges they faced, and their psychological state.

In the 1980s, Csikszentmihalyi used this method on groups of workers from around Chicago. The workers came from different industries. Some were in skilled jobs;

some in unskilled. Some were blue-collar; some white collar. They were given pagers that beeped on seven occasions during the course of the day, and completed the associated surveys.

The results were interesting. Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues found that people were happier working than they were during leisure time. People felt fulfilled and challenged by work-related activities; whereas they felt bored and anxious during their time off. And yet, despite this, people *said* that they didn't like working and that they would prefer to be taking time off. This is where the so-called "paradox of work" comes into play. According to the results of the ESM, people are happier at work than they are at leisure; and yet people still express a desire not to be working.

What are we to make of this? Carr thinks that the results of Csikszentmihalyi's study provide an example of a broader psychological phenomenon: the problem of *miswanting*. This is something that has been documented by the psychologists Daniel Gilbert and Timothy Wilson: people often want things that they think will make them happy but that end up having the opposite effect. In this respect, certain social conventions surrounding the importance of spending time with one's friends and families may be encouraging people to block out the positive feelings associated with work, and biasing them in favour of activities that don't really make them happy.

But why is it that leisure time is not as fulfilling as work? The answer comes from the importance of having *some* level of challenge and pressure in one's life. Csikszent-mihalyi identifies nine different factors that contribute to

the attainment of the flow state. These include achieving the right balance of mental exertion and anxiety. Too much external pressure, arousal, and anxiety and you won't be able to enter a flow state; too little and you will also miss it. The problem is that during down time we often fail to have the right amount of pressure, arousal, and anxiety. Consequently, we lapse into the bored and listless state that Csikszentmihalyi found amongst his experimental subjects. Work has the benefit of imposing a structure and schedule that encourages the right level of arousal and anxiety.

Carr sums up the position in the following quote
…a job imposes a structure on our time that we lose when we're left to our own devices. At work, we're pushed to engage in the kinds of activities that human beings find most satisfying. We're happiest when we're absorbed in a difficult task, a task that has clear goals and that challenges us not only to exercise our talents but to stretch them. We become so immersed in the flow of our work…that we tune out distractions…Our usually wayward attention becomes fixed on what we're doing. (Carr 2015, 16)

In short, as Carr sees it, we are often happiest while working.

3. The Case against Anti-Work and Technological Unemployment

How does all this translate into an argument against technological unemployment? The simplest thing to say is that the evidence introduced by Carr casts into doubt the conditional claim embodied in premise (1). This premise seems to be claiming that there is a causal link between the freedom to choose how to fill one's time and the level of well-being and fulfillment that one

experiences. This now seems to be in doubt. It looks like mere freedom to choose how to fill one's time is not enough. One must fill one's time with the right kinds of activities. People might be able to do this without the rigid structure of a job—Carr himself concedes as much—but often they will not. They will be tempted to rest on their laurels and won't have the pressures and challenges required for truly immersive engagement.

This then is the problem with technological unemployment: The kinds of automating technology that take away human jobs will taken away the pressures, anxieties, and structures needed to attain flow. Indeed, the situation will be exacerbated if the same kinds of automating technology filter into our leisure time as well (e.g. if people start to use automating technologies to assist with the challenging and difficult aspects of their hobbies). In short,

4. *The attainment of flow states is an important component of human well-being.*

5. *If left to their own devices, people are often bad judges of what will get them into a flow state: they may need the pressure and structure imposed by employment to get them to engage in the right sorts of activity (support: Csikszentmihalyi's work).*

6. *Therefore, mere freedom to choose how to spend one's time is no guarantee that the time will be spent engaging in activities that confer greater levels of fulfillment and well-being.*

The result is the negation of premise 1.

Is this argument any good? Even if I concede premise 4, I have a few worries. For one thing, I worry about the over-reliance on Csikszentmihalyi's work. I know the concept of the flow state is widely endorsed, but I'm not so sure about the paradox of work. The study Carr refers

to was performed during the 1980s. Has it been confirmed in subsequent studies? I don't know and I simply have to plead ignorance on the psychological science front here. One thing that does strike me, however, is that in discussing this one example, Carr refers to the notion that people were socially conditioned into thinking that leisure time should be more pleasurable than work. It seems to me that there is a countervailing type of social conditioning that tries to glorify the ideal of being busy and working. Could this be tricking us into thinking that our working lives are more valuable than they actually are?

The second worry I have relates to premise 5. As someone who effectively sets their own agenda for work, I see no reason to suppose the absence of the employment relation would rob us of the ability to achieve true flow states. In particular, I see no reason to suppose that waged labour is the *only thing* that could provide us with the pressures, challenges, and structures needed to engage in truly immersive activity. Indeed, it seems somewhat patronising to suggest that employment is the best way for most people to achieve this. There are plenty of other pressures and challenges in life (e.g. self-imposed goal setting and reinforcement from one's social peers). Indeed, modern technology may actually help to provide a framework for such pressures and challenges outside of waged labour, for example through social sharing and gamification. I'm not saying these are good things; I am just saying there are other ways of achieving the end that Carr seems to desire.

That said, I do think there is something to worry about when it comes to automation and personal fulfillment. There is a danger that automation will be used by

people to avoid all seemingly unpleasant or challenging activities, in the private sphere as well as in the economic sphere. But the danger associated with this must be kept in perspective. There is tendency among automation doom-sayers to assume that automation will take over everything and we will be left with nothing. But this is just as naive as the view that being free to choose one's activities will make one happier. Automating some activities can free us up to pursue others, i.e. to exercise our creativity and ingenuity in other ways. The potential benefits of this, when weighed agains the degrading and negative aspects of waged labour, ought to be kept in mind.

Anyway, that's it for this essay. To briefly recap, anti-work enthusiasts often make the case against work by appealing to the notion that being free to spend one's time as one chooses will allow one to engage in activities that confer greater fulfillment and well-being. Carr, relying on the work of Csikszentmihalyi, argues that this is too simplistic. People are often bad judges of what kinds of activities confer the most benefits. In particular, they are bad at choosing activities that will help them to reach a flow state. Cskikszentmihalyi's studies suggest that people are often happier working than they are at leisure. This is because they need some pressure and challenge in life. Work may be the best source of this pressure and challenge. Although I think this is an interesting argument, and I agree about the simplicity of some anti-work arguments, it seems to me to have several weaknesses. In particular, it seems to rely too much on one study; to ignore many of the negative aspects of work; and to assume too readily that work is the best (or only) source of pressure and challenge.

Anti-Work and Individualist Anarchism

Preface

Nick Ford

This section details the complicated and messy relationship between individualist anarchism and anti-work. Such a relationship isn't fully detailed here but some sketches of possibilities fo their past, present, and future relationship.

The *sort* of individualist anarchism here is not reminiscent of Max Stirner but rather in the work of thinkers like Benjamin Tucker, Voltairine de Cleyre, and mutualists thinkers like Clarence Lee Swartz, Dyer D Lum, and others.

The Individualist Anarchist and Work is a piece I wrote that first appeared in *The New Leveller*, a former periodical operated by members of the Students for a Stateless Society. The essay focuses on how essential anti-work critiques can be situated within an individualist framework.

Ryan Calhoun's *The Libertarian Virtue of Slack* appeals to common ideas among North American libertarianism to make a case for slacking instead of hard work. Calhoun persuasively argues that many of the concepts that modern day libertarians use to often reinforce the work ethic can just as easily be used against it.

If Calhoun's article uses modern day and historical libertarianism as a template than Sheldon Richman's *WORK!* uses it as a full-fledged framework. Richman argues

through many different classically liberal thinkers who could be used to *reinforce* work, instead to argue *against* it.

My piece *Outlining an Anti-Work Story* uses sketches by Voltairine de Cleyre to better explain anti-work theory.

And finally, *What Should You Do On Your Last Day of Work?* is one of the most popular pieces on AbolishWork. com and I thought it would be an appropriate conclusion to this collection. Take this advice at your own risk of course: *we'd never advise anything illegal…*

The Individualist Anarchist and Work

Nick Ford (2014)

When a given structure, institution, activity, or social pattern makes up a lot of our lives as individuals, it demands the attention of individualist anarchists.

Work is one such thing that takes up most of our lives and thus demands our attention.

By "work" I don't mean giving effort or receiving payment for a product that you have made for someone else.

When I say "work" I mean it in the same sense that the post-left anarchist Bob Black uses in his essay, "The Abolition of Work," *Work is production enforced by economic or political means, by the carrot or the stick*.

Some may quibble with my use of the word "enforced," but this just refers to the limited options that we have under state capitalism. Most workers (especially low-skilled workers) have little choice in where they work, and thus inevitably find themselves under a boss.

Of course, it is possible for one to build skills and become more independent. Even then, though, there are plenty of government-created costs to deal with, laws to go through, licenses to obtain, and so on. It's certainly not as easy a process as it would be if this government intervention were eliminated and top-down corporations did not play such a central role in society.

The individualist anarchist may first notice in this situation that the individual is crushed not only by the

political arrangements but the systematic and institutional arrangements of work. Whether you are in retail, the food industry, or even in the upper echelon of a big corporation, it remains true that the individual is crushed.

This is chiefly because of how the individual is both treated and seen.

By now it may be regarded as an overstated sentiment but within the context of corporate culture one is treated as a cog in the machine. None of the individuals are important in themselves but only insofar as their roles are relate to the corporation.

The solution to all of these problems and more relies on not just abolishing the state and capitalism but on abolishing work as well.

Some may object, saying that work in and of itself is not harmful and that the problem is the way that work is structured by interference in the market place. While this is partly true, it is also splitting hairs.

As Bob Black says, to define work is to despise it. You cannot get around the fact that work, as both a systematic and institutional arrangement, is primarily arranged for the benefit of a small class of people against the individuals at the bottom. Sure, you could restructure work in some sense; maybe make it more fun like Google does for its employees. But this is just work with a nice mask on. To paraphrase Cody Wilson, it's just a more comforting whistle we can do while oppression is going on. Because when we look at these "nicer" relations we still see individuals subjugated to ends that are largely not their own and that they have no real investment or say in.

The trick here is that Google wants to blur the line

between our lives outside of work and inside it. For both the individualist anarchist and the anti-work proponent there is nothing more insidious and potentially destructive than this. For it reassures the individual that they are not in a environment that they have little control over.

But the individualist anarchist must resist these scenarios, whether the state with a nicer face (social democracy), capitalism with a nicer face (liberalism), or work with a nicer face (Google and the like). These are all just masks that these institutions and systems put on to make us as individuals feel as if we are not grossly disempowered under current circumstances.

And as anarchists we should know better. We know that the individual will not be respected in situations where their autonomy is not taken seriously. If individuals have contracts they cannot renegotiate reliably or relations they do not have as much of a say in as the other person does, then how can their autonomy be respected?

To be clear, Google isn't trying to lighten their workers' load. They are trying to blur the distinctions between working for them and *living*. I think this idea of fusing our identity to the corporation should concern any libertarian with similar fears about tying our identity to the nation state.

So what can be done to oppose work?

Individualist anarchists should be sympathetic to radical labor unions like the Industrial Workers of the World and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, but also be willing to break with unions when necessary. Slowing down on the job, working to rule, calling out sick, and so on can all be done individually as well as collectively.

But typically these tactics are going to be to useful only in ameliorating conditions in a given workplace. In the long run we need to work on building alternative institutions filled with productive play and autonomous activity that is chosen not out of necessity or via governmental restrictions but from the individual's free action. Cooperatives and independent contracting associations are two good examples of this.

Most important to realize is that there are no panaceas here. Personally, I try to live cheaply, share costs with others, and use technology as a few of my methods to minimize and outright avoid work. But I don't claim these things will work for everyone.

Choose what works for you and try to take the day off for once.

We could all use a little time off for the coming revolution.

The Libertarian Virtue of Slack

Ryan Calhoun (2014)

The tenets of the *Tao Te Ching* express the first anarchist or at least proto-anarchist political philosophy, to my knowledge. The Taoist opposition to government springs from a radical non-interventionist philosophy on all three major branches of philosophy. While Taoism rejects the normative, they recognize a sort of logic about the state of the universe, and that forced intervention into affairs of people is bound to cause even worse chaos.

This doctrine is known as Wu-Wei, translated imprecisely as *non-action*. Putting it very roughly, you do not need to force your will onto the world around you in order for it to yield positive results. There is also a principle of *least action*, which holds that many things are better left untouched, rather than touched and so possibly worsened. You cannot know all possible effects of your actions. This doctrine does not urge people never to better things around them, but teaches that such action should come naturally to them, that they should not be compelled either by force or by various social pressures to complete an action that they might otherwise not do.

The common libertarian nowadays is of the same non-interventionist temperament as the Taoists. They endorse individual preference, spontaneity, and self-interest. They loathe the State and central planners of all kinds. Most libertarians identify, also, as individualists—both methodologically and ethically. However, much of libertarian culture is hostile to the idea of the slacker, of the non-contributor, of the lazy. Libertarians have very

much embraced the protestant work ethic: work in and of itself is valuable, that it's good to work, to be disciplined, and to be rigorous. While all libertarians, in line with the non-aggression principle, must support the right to be lazy, most libertarians have taken to looking down upon those who simply don't do much with their lives.

I think the Taoists got it right, and that while all libertarians do not have to be Taoists (nor much of anything, in reality), I think there is a case that libertarians should support those who are marginalized as slackers. Take this to be in the spirit of Walter Block's fabulous book, *In Defense of the Undefendable.*

First, reasons to oppose slackers: Historian Thaddeuss Russell has written a lot in support of slackers and other derelicts of societal duty, and in opposition to the work ethic. He shows with a good deal of historical evidence that the real movers and shakers of freedom were narrow-sighted, self-interested individuals who shirked their supposed duties. But one argument even he raises of why many people, including himself, might not want to universally endorse this behavior is because, if everyone within society acted in such a manner, things would simply not get done. We owe economic stability to the people who show up to work every day. So the slacker enjoys the privileged status of sitting on his ass playing no part in the system that allows him to be lazy.

There is a long libertarian tradition (beginning with the Austrians) to recognize the disutility of labor. Labor is in essence what stands away from you and what you really value. Labor is what people subtract to the maximum to maximize their preference. Better to work four hours a

day for $20 than eight hours for $25, obviously. Let us say, then, that one only cares to work minimally, to show up late, to do what he pleases with his time. He values sloth and leisure more than a job. The Austrian must concede there is not much reason for this man to alter his course of action. In fact, this man is just demonstrating a preference shared by all individuals.

Secondly, there is much literature in the libertarian and anarchist canon emphasizing the foolish logic of simply chasing the best possible economic effect without regard to other concerns. Murray Rothbard didn't think a problem arose simply because someone could show that a libertarian society might be less productive in areas like technology.

I also think it's important to recognize that the typical work week is a rather recent phenomenon. There is not much reason to believe that work has to be structured in such a rigorous manner, that people should be tied down to careers, that work has to be so damn laborious. When dealing with an economic system that is obsessed with one way of organizing labor, it's no surprise that many take the path of least resistance.

Some may object and say that they enjoy the work they perform. I would say then, that, to the extent that labor is disutility is the extent to which they aren't really working or laboring. And of course this just isn't true for much of the work done within an economy. Most work ranges from a dull day at the office to depressing and exploitative. People are controlled at work like they are nowhere else in their lives. Most people who say they enjoy their job have a truly enjoyable job.

But what most workers can expect is one that rewards them only with wages, instead of fulfillment of their true desires. The slacker seems to most people like he is cheating the system, but the reality is that slackers simply don't care. They can go from job to unemployment to job to unemployment without much concern. In a truly freed market, slackers serve a purpose in regards to better working conditions and bargaining. There are few whose sloth goes to the point that they will never work, but they only work given certain conditions. So while most are happy to be employed at a lower pay, the slacker holds out.

And in an economy where the employer is the seeker of the employee, unlike our current state-capitalist market, the employer is specifically targeting those who choose not to work. Refusal of work is a tactic that needs to be recognized more often by libertarians who are interested in labor struggle. The slacker is the truly consistent striker.

Surely much of the libertarian rage at slackers comes from the portrayal of welfare recipients within their communities. However, a brief look at the empirical evidence will show that most people on welfare are actually not the notorious welfare queens so belabored on right-wing talk radio, but people who are truly down on their luck and out of a job. Also, as Kevin Carson pointed out recently at the Center for a Stateless Society, welfare accounts for very little of state plunder, and those who are on it certainly deserve the money more than those who truly have rigged the economy in their favor—the upper class.

But what about the hard cases, those who really do take as much from the system as they can? To this I say there is sadly no such thing as a total non-contributor to the system, and even the worst of those who spend much of their lives on unemployment and welfare have been robbed of, and put into the system, more than is calculable.

Finally, slackers are great agorists. While many libertarians talk a big game about the counter-economy, the slacker lives the true counter-economic life. He takes from the system not only in welfare, but also often work that is under the table and therefore untaxed and unregulated. Many slackers are also small-time drug dealers, another class of people libertarians seem to have a hard time with, despite advocating for the end of the drug war. The slacker spends as little as he can to get as much as he wants. Ought this not be the attitude of most market actors? Ought this not be the goal of the agorist?

Libertarians should take the side of the Taoist. There is power in non-action, in simply taking in and enjoying life as it comes to you. While we must not condemn the actions of those who truly do enjoy their work, who are fine with their 9–5 jobs, it is time to shed this phobia of the lazy. It's human nature to minimize the amount of labor and effort one must put into projects that are not inherently valuable to him. It is time to truly embrace the logic of spontaneous orders and end the shaming of the slacker.

"WORK!"

Sheldon Richman (2014)

I hear therefore with joy whatever is beginning to be said of the dignity and necessity of labor to every citizen. There is virtue yet in the hoe and the spade, for learned as well as for unlearned hands. And labor is everywhere welcome; always we are invited to work.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson,
"The American Scholar," 1837

Work!

—Maynard G. Krebs,
The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis, circa 1960

From the start, Americans have had a love-hate relationship with work.

We tend to rhapsodize about labor, but, at least in our personal lives, we praise labor-saving devices and condemn "make-work" schemes. (Unfortunately, public policy is another matter.) Emerson and other pillars of American culture—whom for these purposes I will call the moralists—associated work with dignity and purpose.

Historian Thaddeus Russell teaches us that when the slaves were freed from the Southern plantations, they were pounded with the gospel of work. *Slaves generally considered work to be only a means to wealth, but after emancipation, Americans told them that work—even thankless, nonremunerative work—was a virtue in itself*, Russell writes in *A Renegade History of the United States.* He reports that

the Freedman's Bureau admonished the former slaves, *You must be industrious and frugal. It is feared that some will act from the mistaken notion that Freedom means liberty to be idle. This class of persons, known to the law as vagrants, must at once correct this mistake.* Russell notes that *thousands of black men were rounded up for refusing to work.*

The message was that work is not just an honest and proper way to obtain the necessities of life without mooching off others. The activity in itself is a source of goodness, even saintliness, and should be engaged in unceasingly, taking time out only for eating sleeping, other bodily functions, and tending to one's family duties. One didn't work to live; one lived to work.

Whites had been subjected to the same harangue for ages: work was a reward in itself, apart from remuneration, because "idle hands are the devil's playground."

We must be clear that the message was not merely that work could be a source of satisfaction apart from the money. The message amounted to a vilification of leisure, indeed, of consumption. (Some conservatives still seem to hold this view.)

In a good illustration of the "Bootleggers and Baptists" phenomenon, the moralists were joined in their labor evangelism by employers, who needed uncomplaining workers willing to spend long hours in unpleasant factories. People preferred leisure and looked for every opportunity to indulge in it. Hence, "Saint Monday," which, as Russell notes, Benjamin Franklin sneered at because it "is as duly kept by our working people as Sunday; the only difference is that instead of employing their time cheaply in church, they are wasting it expen-

sively in the alehouse."

We get a different picture of labor from the econo-
mists. The classical economists and the Austrians (at least
from Ludwig von Mises onward) stressed the unpleasant-
ness—the "disutility" and even sad necessity—of labor.
Adam Smith and other early economists equated work
with "toil," which is not a word with positive connota-
tions. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith writes,

> *The real price of every thing, what every thing really costs to
> the man who wants to acquire it, is the toil and trouble of
> acquiring it. What every thing is really worth to the man who
> has acquired it and who wants to dispose of it, or exchange it
> for something else, is the toil and trouble which it can save to
> himself, and which it can impose upon other people. What is
> bought with money or with goods is purchased by labour, as
> much as what we acquire by the toil of our own body. That
> money, or those goods, indeed, save us this toil.*

Frédéric Bastiat carried on this tradition by empha-
sizing that exchange arises out of a wish to be *spared labor*.
One accepts the terms of an exchange only if obtaining
the desired good in other ways would be more arduous.

For Bastiat and other early economists, exchange
was the foundation of society. "Society is purely and
solely a continual series of exchanges," Destutt de
Tracy wrote. It follows that the penchant for economiz-
ing effort—the preference for leisure — is a beneficent
feature of human nature. (Somewhere, the science-fiction
writer Robert Heinlein has a character say that the
wheelbarrow must have been invented by a lazy person.)

Further, Bastiat explained, technological advance-
ment is valued precisely because it substitutes the free

services of nature for human toil. In his uncompleted magnum opus, *Economic Harmonies*, he wrote,

> *It is characteristic of progress (and, indeed, this is what we mean by progress) to transform onerous utility into gratuitous utility; to decrease [exchange-]value without decreasing utility; and to enable all men, for fewer pains or at smaller cost, to obtain the same satisfactions.*

By onerous utility, he meant utility bought with sweat and strain; by gratuitous utility, he meant utility provided by nature free of charge. When ingenuity is applied to the making of a good, "its production has in large measure been turned over to Nature. It is obtained for less expenditure of human effort; less service is performed as it passes from hand to hand."

Needless to say, this is a good thing.

Of course, some of the freed-up time will be devoted to producing other goods that were unaffordable yesterday, but some will be devoted to consumption, or leisure. The proportion set aside for leisure will likely increase as living standards rise (assuming government interference doesn't deny workers their rewards for higher productivity).

> *The goal of all men, in all their activities, is to reduce the amount of effort in relation to the end desired and, in order to accomplish this end, to incorporate in their labor a constantly increasing proportion of the forces of Nature... [T]hey invent tools or machines, they enlist the chemical and mechanical forces of the elements, they divide their labors, and they unite their efforts. How to do more with less, is the eternal question asked in all times, in all places, in all situations, in all things.*

(Bastiat elaborates on this in his remarkable chapter 8, "Private Property and Common Wealth.") Bastiat agreed with Adam Smith, who wrote, *Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production.* Hence the economists rejected the moralists' view that production is an end in itself.

We see this same lack of enthusiasm for work in John Stuart Mill, an influential classical economist as well as a philosopher. In 1849 Thomas Carlyle published an article lamenting that the end of slavery in Great Britain meant that white people couldn't make sure that blacks worked enough (for *whites*). Indeed, this is why Carlyle dubbed economics, which was premised on free labor, "the dismal science."

Mill wrote an anonymous response ("The Negro Question") in the following issue. He protested Carlyle's suggestion that blacks were meant to serve white people.

Then, as I wrote previously,

Mill … turned to 'the gospel of work,' praised by Carlyle, 'which, to my mind, justly deserves the name of a cant.' He attacked the idea that work is an end in itself, rather than merely a means. 'While we talk only of work, and not of its object, we are far from the root of the matter; or, if it may be called the root, it is a root without flower or fruit.… In opposition to the gospel of work, I would assert the gospel of leisure, and maintain that human beingscannot rise to the finer attributes of their nature compatibly with a life filled with labor … the exhausting, stiffening, stupefying toil of many kinds of agricultural and manufacturing laborers. To reduce very greatly the quantity of work required to carry on existence is as needful as to distribute it more equally; and the progress of science, and the increasing ascendency of justice and good sense, tend to this result.

In Mises and Murray Rothbard we find similar views: work is to be economized. Mises devoted an entire chapter in *Socialism* to refuting the state socialists' claim that work is unpleasant only because of the market economy, and that it would be blissful if private property were abolished and the market were replaced with state central planning.

Under any system, Mises wrote, labor may afford a small (and insignificant, he thought) measure of direct satisfaction, but that soon passes. Yet people must keep working to obtain its indirect satisfactions, the goods it enables them to buy.

Mises may overstate his case here, as did his mentor Carl Menger in the other direction (in 1871, mind you): *The occupations of by far the great majority of men afford enjoyment, are thus themselves true satisfactions of needs, and would be practiced, although perhaps in smaller measure or in a modified manner, even if men were not forced by lack of means to exert their powers.*

Mises mocked the state socialists by putting scare quotes around the words *joy of labor*, asking, *If work gives satisfaction per se why is the worker paid? Why does he not reward the employer for the pleasure which the employer gives him by allowing him to work?*

What people often take for the joy of labor, he said, was actually the satisfaction of finishing a task, the *pleasure in being free of work rather than pleasure in the work itself.* Mises quoted the medieval monks who appended to the manuscript copies they had just painstakingly produced, *Laus tibi sit Christe, quoniam liber explicit iste* (which he translated inexactly as "Praise the Lord because the work is completed").

For Rothbard, leisure is a "desirable good," a consumer good, which people will forgo only if, at the margin, the fruits of a unit of labor undertaken are preferred to the satisfaction that a unit of leisure would afford. Rothbard acknowledged that labor can be satisfying and wrote,

> *In cases where the labor itself provides positive satisfactions, however, these are intertwined with and cannot be separated from the prospect of obtaining the final product. Deprived of the final product, man will consider his labor senseless and useless, and the labor itself will no longer bring positive satisfactions.* Those activities which are engaged in purely for their own sake are not labor but are pure play, consumers' goods in themselves.
> *Play, as a consumers' good, is subject to the law of marginal utility as are all goods, and the time spent in play will be balanced against the utility derived from other obtainable goods. In the expenditure of any hour of labor, therefore, man weighs the disutility of the labor involved (including the leisure forgone plus any dissatisfaction stemming from the work itself) against the utility of the contribution he will make in that hour to the production of desired goods (including future goods and any pleasure in the work itself), i.e., with the value of his marginal product.* [Emphasis added.]

Rothbard's mentor, Mises, made a fundamental point about human action when he wrote,

> *Even if labor were a pure pleasure it would have to be used economically, since human life is limited in time, and human energy is not inexhaustible.*

That being the case, I will reserve further thoughts on work for another time.

Meanwhile, *Laus tibi sit Christe, quoniam liber explicit iste!*

Outlining an Anti-Work Story

Nick Ford (2015)

For a while now I have been trying to rack my head and figure out how to tell a *story* about the anti-work position to better exemplify its means and ends. It would be just as easy to simply offer a dictionary definition or a definition from a favored author of mine, but I have tried this with multiple people and each time it tends to fall short. So I want to try a different tactic and tell a story instead.

Now, within this encapsulation I want to define where this anti-work position comes from, where it is going and how it approaches this point of origin, as well as a hopeful future full of rest and relaxation. This seems like a fairly daunting task, but I think it is within the realm of the possible to at least tease out certain *themes* that would be a part of any such story.

I have found a few instructive pieces by the anarchist thinker Voltairine de Cleyre that I believe exemplify the themes or ideas that would be a part of a good anti-work story. Voltairine de Cleyre is not very well known in anarchist circles, perhaps even less so within the anti-work movement. She was an "anarchist without adjectives," who wrote about many social issues ranging from marriage to direct action to the Mexican revolution.

Although the subject of work was never her main concern with her essays or her poems, she wrote a few sketches that touch on the subject. These sketches bring up themes or ideas that I believe would aid the telling of any anti-work story.

To start then, I believe that a major theme of any good anti-work story would involve the issue of *silence*. This is because as with any systematic pressure or cultural norm there is going to be a lot of reasons to get lost in a fatalistic fog. We will find ourselves either unable or unwilling to confront the problems in front of us. Our position will be either "there are no alternatives" or "we can't even *begin* to think of an alternative" to the present state of affairs.

In the first sketch, *A Rocket of Iron,* we can see the sort of fog that swallows us all whole and makes solidarity (an example of an alternative) incredibly difficult:

> *For an hour I had been staring thru the window at that chill steam, thickening and blurring out the lines that zigzagged thru it indefinitely, pale drunken images of facts staggering against the invulnerable vapor that walled me in,—a sublimated grave marble! Were they all ghosts, those figures wandering across the white night, hardly distinguishable from the posts and pickets that wove in and out like half-dismembered bodies writhing in pain? My own fingers were curiously numb and inert; had I, too, become a shadow?*

We are cut in half and made a mess by work at the end of the day and somehow, at the same time, we are called upon to revolt, to rebel, to resist, and to refuse with all of our passions and hearts. This task becomes much more difficult, when the fog makes us all less distinct to each other. We cannot as easily tell friend from foe, comrade from counter-revolutionary, and fellow worker from brown-nosing worker. The lines become blurry and difficult to measure and our strategies of resistance become harder to plan out, much less conceive on a fundamental level.

Work does this to us through the constant belittlement of our efforts and dignity. It affronts our individual value and accosts us whenever we try to assert it through ingenuity or something that may harm the institutional place of the bosses. It harms us anytime we try to strike out on our own within the workplace. If we try to give customers advice that may help them get around the corporate bureaucracy, then, in many cases, we are at risk of being fired. If we speak even a word of our own lives, activism or radicalism on social networks then we risk, once again, being fired. If we talk back to the boss or even just offer constructive advice, we risk being fired.

Even more than that this fog makes us all ghosts to each other. We phase through each other as if their loss could not be our loss. Or as if their flesh does not even remotely resemble our own when it is frayed.

Work as we know it cuts down on the potentiality and possibilities with regards to solidaristic labor struggle as well as being able to carve out our own way in this world. Our visions are dimmer, our lives seem duller and we cannot possibly imagine a world that is better. At least, not as vividly as we'd like to.

Work isn't *just* this theme of blindness; there is a larger theme of perpetuating *non-existence within society*. It diminishes our state of being, our history and past into a tiny paper we call a "resume" and regards us as nothing more than the sum of our actions that we perform. Our personal problems and reasons or feelings for not wanting to participate are disregarded.

In the second sketch by Voltairine, *To Strive and Fail,* Voltairine explains to us what this systematic and historic

non-existence looks like,

> *Behind the fading picture, stretched dim, long shadows of*
> *silent generations, with rounded shoulders and bent backs*
> *and sullen, conquered faces. And they had all, most likely,*
> *dreamed of some wonderful thing they had to do in their*
> *world, and all had died and left it undone. And their work*
> *had been washed away, as if writ in water, and no one*
> *knew their dreams. And of the fruit of their toil other men*
> *had eaten, for that was the will of the triune god; but of*
> *themselves was left no trace, no sound, no word, in the*
> *world's glory; no carving upon stone, no indomitable ghost*
> *shining from a written sign, or song singing out of black*
> *foolish spots on paper,—nothing.*
>
> *They were as though they had not been. As they all and*
> *died, she too would die, slave of the triple Terror, sacrificing*
> *the highest to the meanest, that somewhere in some lighted*
> *ball-room or gas-bright theater, some piece of vacant flesh*
> *might wear one more jewel in her painted hair.*
>
> *"My soul," she said bitterly, "my soul for their diamonds!"*
> *It was time to sleep, for to-morrow—WORK.*

This perpetuating of non-existence is, in a sense,
another way of silencing us, but it is also a much bigger
sort of silencing than simply turning us into less distinct
individuals. It banishes our very *history* and makes it
nearly impossible to look to either the present *or* the past
for any sort of hope.

Work not only takes away our valuable time, time
we could spend devoted to our own dreams and desires,
but it *silences* past generations who tried and, most likely,
failed in the same way that we may also strive and fail.
Our stories may very well end with us having no goals in

mind for ourselves or all of the goals in the world, but whatever road we pick we may be doomed to perpetuate the history of non-existence that work helps create.

Instead of pursuing our dreams we must pursue the making of others diamonds. We must pursue other people's pleasures, passions and dreams. *We* have no individual desires or wants or limits to be broken, we have nothing and work has *everything*.

Work *has* a history.

It is the history of the laborer who never stopped working, who are on friendly terms with their boss, who wants the white picket fence and the family dog along with their 2.5 kids. They just want to live quietly and have picnics and cookouts with their neighbors. They are of course white, middle-class and well endowed with wealth (or at least enough to get by and keep up middle-class appearances). There are no ghettos where they live, there are no fogs or ghosts or perpetuity of non-existence in their lives. They need no giants to stand on for they *are* the giants.

What can we do as the silent ghosts with no history, against these giants?

We can make demands and we can try to reach them.

And in the third and final sketch, *The Sorrows of the Body*, Voltairine shows us some base desires we could aim for:

> *Air, room, light rest, nakedness when I would not be clothed, and when I would be clothed, garments that did not fetter; freedom to touch my mother earth, to be with her in storm and shine, as the wild things are,—this is what I wanted— this, and free contact with my fellows;—not to love, and lie*

and be ashamed, but to love and say I love, and be glad of
it; to feel the currents of ten thousands years of passion
flooding me, body to body, as the wild things meet. I have
asked no more.

This should not seem like a radical demand, but it *becomes* one through the existence and prevalence of work, which will not give us time to be ourselves, to have voices, to be physical beings who are not cut into millions of different pieces, each serving the needs of someone else. Work will not let us alone.

It is like the fly that Voltairine mentions in her essay *Crime and Punishment*, saying that she, as the fly, will not let us alone until we *know* oppression. The fly in *this* case is a creature for *work* and thus will not let us alone until we *know* work. It will not let us alone until the breath of work become *our breath*. Until the strides that we make with work become *our strides.* Until the identity of work becomes *our identity*. Until we *cannot* even know or conceptualize what peace *means*. When people ask what others will do with their free time they are, explicitly, telling us that the fly has not only spoken to them but is *inside* them. It has infested their brain and told them that there is *no* alternative, but for us all to work ourselves into the dust.

This fly is the same sort of being that *The Sorrows of the Body*'s main character has to deal with.

Their soul is constantly pushing them away from the beach, from relaxation, from love, from enjoying their meals and from any "beastly" pleasures that they deem unfit for the person they inhabit.

And once it finally eased up, the person they inhab–

ited decided it was better to be dead then to keep living as they had been.

Killed by their work ethic.

Killed by work itself.

So we know our demands, but how will we reach them?

To end, we return to the beginning and take another look at *A Rocket of Iron* where we are given a picture of resistance, one that is quiet but loud at the same time.

A comrade called, a sudden terrified cry. There was a wild rush, a mad stampede of feet, a horrible screech of hissing metal, and a rocket of iron shot upward toward the black roof, bursting and falling in a burning shower. Three figures lay writhing along the floor, among the leaping, demoniac sparks.

Along the way, as she is telling this story, Voltairine constantly reverses the narrative and *forgets* this or that detail that was originally involved. What was the face of the culprit? What was her reason to be there? Voltairine will constantly reverse and revise the narrative of this tragic event while implying that the fog, that I mentioned earlier, is so great that it makes the details equally foggy. This loud act of resistance then becomes a quiet one and ends simply.

This isn't to say that acts of terrorism are what I or Voltairine advocate, but it is interesting to note that most of the resistance that happens in any given system are similar actions—ones that are loud but quiet at the same time. Ones that could possibly be forgotten if the fog gets any thicker around us, but ones that silently cut through the fog, undermine it and allow us to recognize

each other as individuals.

In any given workplace there are always going to be acts of silent resistance such as leaving a little early, going to lunch early, collectively deciding to walk off early or ignore a bosses one small command and pursuing what we want to do instead. Individually these acts happen all of the time, but collectively they need to happen more.

Anytime I would walk off by myself during work I risked being reprimanded, but whenever I did it with other co-workers I knew that this silent yet loud action would be a lot less likely to get me individually repri-manded. A simple tactic for the quiet yet loud resistance then is solidarity as well as individualized resistance that happens both informally and formally. Both seem impor-tant in undermining work as it stands.

What then is the anti-work story?

I hope that by drawing upon these three sketches by Voltairine, I have given some of the themes of an anti-work story, what our basic aims may look like and a way to get there. What remains to be seen is who are the protagonists and antagonists.

The anti-work story is fundamentally *our* story because it has *us* as the main character and the *ruling class* as its perpetual antagonists. Not only are these its antagonists but *any* manifestations of this ruling class or its helpers (the fly for example which represents the Puritan Work Ethic) must also be regarded as things we are in perpetual opposition to. These are things we cannot allow to exist if we wish to flourish and if we are to realize that the basest of demands should not be radical ones.

The anti-work story is one of raising our voices, giving people ample space and time to cultivate these voices and ultimately to re-appropriate our physicality and identities.

We do all of this so that we may one day escape this fog and be silent ghosts no more.

Our bodies are our own; let us take our stand against work now and forever!

What Should You Do
on Your Last Day of Work?

Nick Ford and Various Anti-Work Friends (2014)

I reached out to friends about what I should do on my last day (what I actually did on that day is a story for another day) and I got plenty of great suggestions.

I figured there was no better place to post them than here. I have avoided attribution for reasons I hope are obvious, and have also included some links for how to do some of the actions.

The first recommendation was--

Walk really slowly.

This one is fairly common as a tactic against work I would imagine and is a pretty basic part of trying to work less. I already did this all of the time so this one was both a no-brainer and an easy one for me to do."

On the opposite side--

Or walk around sporadically in a hurry to random different parts of the store as if one was going to do some sort of task. Make it really hard for people to get a hold of you. Pretend to be adjusting items on shelves, but actually be misadjusting them.

I couldn't really feasibly do this because of a muscle injury I have been dealing with but if you can, then this is a great way to stop working. I would add though that it is probably even better when you mix this with slowing yourself down at certain points so you don't overwork yourself…in trying not to work.

In other words, the key word here should be *sporadi-*

cally. Try not to do what is suggested here on a near-consistent (let alone a consistent) basis or it may be more work than it's worth.

Here was a nice, clean one--

Clog the toilet with paper and your own business if you can. It's recommended you leave the bathroom afterwards and the building soon after that.

Although I don't necessarily recommend this, it is certainly doable:

Loosen the screws on the boss' chair

Make sure if you do this that no one is going get seriously hurt. At least personally speaking, while I don't like most bosses, I am also not really interested in hurting them either.

Here was one that could be a bit of fun, though may not be for me:

Organize the jeans by shade into the shape of a dick

I am sure someone else can figure that one out...

Here is an *awesome* one--

Convince someone else to quit.

I really don't know some universal way to do this but if you think you have the communication skills and the time and a good opportunity then why not give it a shot?

A somewhat inventive trick--

Lock a door that the bosses need to get into but now can't.

This one may be a bit risky but it could also be a lot of fun. Use this advice cautiously.

Here is a classic one--

Work-to rule: Basically do everything exactly as told to do and try to do it so it takes as long as possible. They can't do much

to you (hypothetically) because hey, you're only following the rules, right?

I *sort of* do this fairly often. I try to take bosses literally and work within exact limits of what they are saying, etc. It can be effective sometimes.

Here's a fairly interesting idea--

I have always been curious to see what would happen if you just started crying. Just start crying big hot quivering lip tears until they offer you a raise or ask you to leave.

I certainly did not have the nerve for this but hey, maybe you do!

Turn the last hour into one of free play amongst your fellow workers.

A problem with this one is that your fellow workers may not be on their last day or may not want to deal with the consequences. If you are really dedicated to this idea perhaps try to plan it out in advance…

And finally:

Call out sick

Conclusion: An Anti-Work World

Nick Ford (2016)

Win or lose, Popeye, we're in the fuckin' greatest game ever played   –Pete Rose

I: Post-Work Strategy: Our Demands

John Danaher was the first entry in this collection and that was no accident. I'm a huge fan of the way he has delved into the topic of anti-work. Danher has made anti-work an idea that can be presented rationally, carefully and in a highly principled manner.

Despite this Danaher has some limitations in that his politics are rather unsystematic as he himself admits. As such he tends to downplay politics in most of his works when it comes to *how* we'd actually *get* to a post-work world. The notable exception is his blog post entitled *Demanding a Post-Work World: Technological Unemployment and the Human Future.*

In it, Danaher reviews the book *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams. The book argues that leftists should *embrace* the power of technology that have been displacing workers. Explaining that in the long-run it will aid them in their fight against capitalism. Danaher takes particular interest in their claims that capitalism creates surplus populations, e.g. people who aren't needed for capitalism to continue.

He also highlights their demands that they make in the hopes of reaching a more anti-work world. These

demands consist of a three-day weekend, a universal basic income (UBI), full automation and a devulation of the work ethic. For the sake of space I won't be addressing arguments in favor or against the UBI but briefly, I find the UBI inadequate at best and counterproductive at worst for my own anarchist variant of anti-work.

That said, Srnicek and Williams make it clear that we need to consider a post-work world largely due to the current *crisis* caused by work today. The precariousness of both the employed and the unemployed, the lack of participation in labor markets and the harsh ways those who are outside the world of work are all symptoms they denote.

All of these things aren't merely indicative of work but also *capitalism* and even more directly it is indicative of a state-capitalist system. A relation of markets, capital and government that privileges those with the most material wealth over those with less through the threat of violence.

Thankfully these consequences also have a flip side: They only reinforce the *necessity* of a post-work world even more. As more workers are displaced, income gaps increase and privileged elites tend to benefit at the expense of the workers, the need for a new model of work becomes obvious. But contra Danaher I don't think this need stems from appeals to the supposedly neutral or liberal state but rather a *demand* for autonomy and freedom that applies inwards.

I think what the post-work world needs most is *anarchism*.

For sake of argument, let's presume the anarchist

model superior. In such a case what becomes of these demands that Srnicek and Williams advocate? The demands become demands *we* make ourselves. We organize voluntary and mutually beneficial groups (radical unions, cooperatives, people-powered movements, etc.) to rally for shorter days, more automation and less capitalism.

Simply asking for more automation without *also* opposing capitalism will likely result in further concentration of wealth to those who can claim the machines much easier through a mix of their social and material capital. Therefore Srnicek and Williams are right to say that our demands must be anti-capitalist but I don't think they don't go far enough.

First off, Danaher is correct to say that their ideas of intersectional demands seem quixotic. For example, Srnicek and Williams claim that demanding more automation would given workers more bargaining power. But how are workers supposed to *benefit* in their bargaining power by increasing automation? If robots take over then most of the labor that the workers are doing necessarily diminishes.

Instead, I'd agree with Danaher that the labor movement should accept that it will *lose* power over time, but in certain areas as opposed to others. Because while full automation would go into effect for reasons Danaher has outlined earlier in this collection it wouldn't be the *capitalists* who would be able to reap monopoly profits.

The way to better ensure that possibility of limiting the "winner takes all" problem that Danaher outlines is to make our movements *radical*. In this context our

movements shouldn't be *focusing* on reform or appeal so much as creating our own autonomous conditions for ourselves, our friends and within our communities. This attempt is not likely to be easy, but given the history of trying to appeal to the state through legislative means, I see no better option.

Lastly, Danaher comments on how Srnicek and Williams offer us no concrete *vision* of what a post-work world might actually *look* like.

To get a better picture, we'll discuss games.

II: Post-Work Goals: Games
In Bernard Suits *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* he defines "games" as "the voluntary attempt to over-come unnecessary obstacles" (p. 41 or 55, depending on your version). Thomas Hurka's and John Tasioulas's paper entitled *Games and the Good* spends much of its time analyzing this concept of games.

They elucidate that for Suits the notion of games involves three conditions: A prelusory goal, constitutive rules and a lusory attitude towards the game itself.

Prelusory goals are things that can be described independently of the activity you are engaging in. With games you might express a prelusory goal by saying that you are trying to get a ball in net more times than your opponent does. These things can all be understood *outside* of the game.

Constitutive rules prohibit the players of a game from achieving their prelusory goals in the most efficient ways possible If you tried to play basketball by being able to use a ladder then most people would agree this would

invalidate the game-ness of it.

Lusory attitudes are what *drive* the constitutive rules to begin with. Without it, we could easily say that (to use Hurka and Tsaioula's example) a farmer who isn't sowing their farm with the most efficient tools could be engaging in a game. However they have no *say* in whether they are using the most efficient means of sowing or not. Their relation to inefficient tools is involuntary and hence the farmer is not engaging in any sort of game at all.

Hurka and Tsaioula then quote Suits more fleshed out definition of games:

'To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by the rules . . . where the rules prohibit the use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]." (p. 3)

Interestingly, for Suits this isn't just *a* good in life but *the supreme good* in life. Suits went so far as to say that a *society* built on the idea of games would be a sort of utopia.

This leads us to Danaher and his blog post *The Philosophy of Games and the Postwork Utopia* where he anlayzes Hurka and Tsaioula's paper.

Danaher confronts the anti-work movement with a rather obvious and serious flaw: Our ideology is, as he calls it, *undertheorized.* That is to say, we have much of the ideological framework for considering past and present situated but we've done very little to consider what a post-work world would actually *look* like. Sure, we've had fellow anti-work theorists throughout history give these

unsystematic and vague ideas of what it'd look like, but could we get more concrete?

Using Hurka and Tsaioula's notion of games derived from Suits, Danaher thinks we can.

Danaher's argument amounts to suggesting that a purely ludic life is a desirable one that can lead to a certain type of flourishing. It's fair to say that the *sort* of flourishing happening here may be very different from what most people may consider but it has its merits nonetheless.

He first considers the pessimistic view of anti-work which says that we would simply lose too much value if we tried to get to a post-work world. He then moves to outlining the analysis of games provided by Hurka and Tsaioula and concluding by using this outline as a defense of the logic life. Given we've already outlined Suits; I don't consider that point worth dwelling on.

For the sake of argument I will agree with Danaher that the three meanings in life we should all be striving towards are The Good, The True and The Beautiful. Doing these things, achieving moral goods, discovering facts about reality and producing or finding things of beauty, are all *necessary* components of a life that will flourish.

An example that Danaher uses is someone who dedicates their life to ending cancer and succeeds. Their life has gained much meaning because of the amount of moral good they have caused through their actions (and a byproduct of this is also better understanding: The True).

But if Danaher and I are correct about technological unemployment, what if these machines sever our ties to these Goods? If we're less able (or not able at all) to

produce things through jobs anymore, then what moral goods could we achieve? After all, it surely won't *just* be the degrading and harmful jobs that are automated. It could be jobs that give people meaning and would have allowed them to understand beauty and the universe better.

Thankfully this is where games come in.

We can deduce that making an income, producing things through a *job* and so forth aren't the *only* things that give us meaning. Creating music, playing games, having hobbies and engaging in social events with others are all things that can help us achieve The Good, The True and The Beautiful, respectively. When people create a piece of music and put it out into the world this piece of music may help them appreciate The Beautiful more, but it needn't be a *job*.

Nor would such an endeavor have to make them any sort of income. After all, there are plenty of *non-monetary goods* that folks make from their jobs as it is. Things like excellence, community, social status and social contribution are all non-monetary goods.

We'll talk about these goods in more depth before concluding.

III: Post-Work Philosophy — The Good Life
The Goods of Work (other than money) in a Postwork Future by Danaher takes a look at Anca Gheus and Lisa Herzog's joint paper entitled *The Goods of Work (other than money)*. Danaher's definition of work is, "The performance of some skill in return for, or in the ultimate hope of receiving, an extrinsic economic reward." Which is fine as far as a value-free definition goes, but for our

(anti-work) purposes, I prefer to define work in a slightly different way—as the **constrained** performance of some skill (cognitive, emotional, physical etc.) in return for **substituting your own** ends with an economic reward, or in the ultimate hope of receiving some such reward.

A further clarification by the post-Marxist Andre Gorz can further elucidate my meaning of work. Whereas Danaher's definition tends to avoid housework for reasons he provides which I find unsatisfying my definition can easily include it as well.

At the same time, my definition couldn't be taken to be too broad either since not *all* activity is constrained or done out of the interest of someone else. Danaher may take issue with the lack of value-free judgment in this definition but I believe that it suits my needs better.

The goods that Danaher reviews from Gheus and Herzog's paper are *excellence*, *community*, *social standing* and *social contribution*.

Excellence often stems from the passion you have involved with your craft and derives from a sustained effort. *Community* revolves around the cooperative environment you may enjoy while doing your job. *Social standing* has to do with your reputation and sense of self-worth. *Social contributions* refer to the way that people can often (though this isn't the only way) individuals can offer goods and services to their communities.

Danaher quickly points out that the *reason* so many people get these things from their job is due to the *privileged* role that work is in to begin with. If work wasn't so culturally sacred and economically necessary would we see people get these sorts of goods elsewhere?

Once again, this all goes back to games.

If people have free time due to technological automation then they'll need something to do with their time. Danaher and I both agree that it's likely that if they want to lead a flourishing life their life will be filled with games of one sort or another.

My argument isn't that everyone will be playing baseball with each other until the end of time. Rather, I construe "games" in the Suits sense as a rather *broad* phenomenon. We always have situations where we create rules so that things can become challenging to us.

When I play bass guitar I like to improvise on it because it makes my experience more varied, exciting, and *challenging*. It's a sort of *game* for me because I could play all of these strings independently of it, I have certain rules (in line with music theory) and I'm voluntarily choosing to apply these rules *so* that I can do this game to derive more meaning possible.

But most people wouldn't *think* of this as a game in today's society. I'd argue that this is a perception that we need to change. The idea that games are merely limited to baseball and football are narrow conceptions of what Bob Black "productive play" in *Smokestack Lightning*:

> *Activities which are, for the time and the circumstances and the individuals engaged in them, intrinsically gratifying play yet which, in their totality, produce the means of life for all. The most necessary functions such as those of the "primary sector" (food production) already have their ludic counterparts in hunting and gardening, in hobbies.*

Likewise, I see no reason why games or *play* more generally can't have consequences. As Black asks, "Does

poker cease to be play if you bet on the outcome?" We
can play and we can *play for keeps* all while still having a
fun time doing so.

Similar to Black,

*My proposal is to combine the best part (in fact, the only
good part) of work—the production of use-values—with
the best of play, which I take to be every aspect of play, its
freedom and its fun, its voluntariness and its intrinsic
gratification, shorn of the Calvinist connotations of frivolity
and "self-indulgence…*

But even when we think about games and play in a
narrower sense we can often see they're done for produc-
tive purposes. One of the biggest reasons play is encour-
aged in children is that it encourages socialization and
exercise. And although play isn't encouraged with adults,
the games they play quite often help their abilities to
reason while still having a fun time.

But even given all of this most of the writers I've
invoked when it comes to play (save Black) are of the
opinion that games are rather "trivial."

It seems to me that games could only be seen as
trivial if we had some sort of notion of what makes
something important or not to begin with. But neither
Danaher nor the others who wrote on play that I've
mentioned give us any *good reason* to conceive of games
this way.

Games always give us meaningful and substantial
results which is *exactly* why we play them to begin with.
If games did not give us the appropriate amount of
meaning for us then we de facto would not engage in
them at all. This is an essential part of games as everyone

thus far has agreed to and I see no reason why triviality should therefore be a part of the equation.

So what will the Good Life be made out of?

There's much to say but I'll keep my predictive claims brief:

1. First, I think that a post-work world will likely be an *anarchist* one because the benefits of technological unemployment are unlikely to be evenly spread out without it. In addition because I support anti-capital-ist markets, I don't think abolishing markets are likely to result in more autonomy or social cohesion. Therefore a post-work world is one where a diverse array of economic systems (including mutualist and individualist anarchist economies) compete and cooperate to reduce our constrained options.

2. Social activities within these societies are typically going to involve some form of games, productive play and general play. There'll be much time for leisure but the labor we engage with will either be automated or made far easier and voluntary. People will likely create gamified versions of their labor at their leisure to make production easier.

3. Alongside Danaher I think one way of getting around the problems of technological automation is *transhumanism.* Though he doesn't use the term in his paper *Will Life be Worth Living in a World Without Work? Technological Unemployment and the Meaning of Life* (he calls it the "integrationist approach" to technology) it's possible a solution for more meaning in our live may involve transcending our fleshy bodies and death itself.

Admittedly none of this may fully help the under-theorizing issue that Danaher rightly highlights from the anti-work movement. But I both embrace this as a failure and tout it as a chance for us to succeed down the line. If this collection has done one thing for you, I hope it's helped you feel less alone in your anti-work convictions should you have had them before or were convinced.

I hope it's also proved as a sense of inspiration for those who feel like they're alone in the world. That when they think about their day job and analogize it to the worst sensations you could imagine, they feel a bit more comfortable in their own intuitions.

I theorize that the failure of undertheorizing is likely due to the *anarchic* nature of a post-work world. Such a future is unlikely to look much like anything that we have today and the results of a post-work world that *embraces* automation may even promise transcendence of our very humanity. These are all very hard problems to work out and they require knowledge of subjects I simply don't have (e.g. neuroscience, technology, etc.) so my predictions must be tentative.

But part of this anarchic nature of a post-work world means we also *don't* need to theorize out all of the particulars. Giving people more and more autonomy allows them to make increasingly variable choices about their lives and how they go about them. At some point the ability to make their lives easily predictable becomes more trouble than it's worth.

Here's to a future that's unpredictable, fun and full of games.

And as always, happy slacking!

Further Anti-Work
Readings and Resources

Disclaimer: Listing a piece of media here does *not* mean I completely agree with it. The following pieces are listed because I find them interesting, useful, or referenced eough that it'd be odd to exclude them.

I have limited this to pieces I've actually experienced for myself and feel confident recommending, which makes this a non-exhaustive list. However, I am confident that this list is a great starting point.

Anti-Work Sites

Abolish Work abolishwork.com
My personal site which aims to be a central hub and repository for all sorts of anti-work media

The Center for a Stateless Society c4ss.org
While not explicitly anti-work, C4SS hosts interesting anarchist pieces related to labor and work, including articles by me

The Anarchist Library theanarchistlibrary.org
An excellent collection of anarchist texts in general though the keywords "work" and "antiwork" would be useful here

Wikipedia article on "Refusal of Work" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refusal_of_work
This Wiki article deals with everything from Paul LaFargue (the stepson of Marx), the Situationists, automation, and of course anti-work figures and movements throughout history

r/antiwork: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/
A subreddit specifically for anti-work folks and has me moderating among a few other folks

whywork.org
An older but preserved website that attacked work from many angles

Audio Anarchy: http://audioanarchy.org/antiwork.html

A collection of essays that focus on anti-work theory reads aloud for your listening pleasure

International Institute of Not Doing Much: http://slow-downnow.org/

A humorous collection of individuals who like to slack and talk about it once in a blue moon.

Rethinking the Job Culture: http://slowdownnow.org/

While not strictly anti-work the author of this site is certainly critical of work as it stands

The Idler: http://idler.co.uk/

A British magazine often expounding the benefits of laziness

Books/Articles/Essays:

Black, Bob. *The Abolition of Work* on Deoxy.org, 1985
http://deoxy.org/endwork.htm

Russell, Bertrand. *In Praise of Idleness* on Zpub.org, 1932
http://www.zpub.com/notes/idle.html

Lafargue, Paul. *The Right to be Lazy* on Marxists.org, 1883
https://www.marxists.org/archive/lafargue/1883/lazy/

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http://grammar.about.com/od/classicessays/a/beggarsorwell.htm

Dean, Brian. *How "Work" is Framed*, on News Frame, 2011
https://newsframes.wordpress.com/2011/08/31/work-frames/

Thoreau, Henry David. *Life Without Principle* on Thoreau.eserver.org, 1863
http://thoreau.eserver.org/lifewout.html

James, William. *The Gospel of Relaxation* on uky.org, 1899
http://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/jgospel.html

Gorz, Andre. *The Crisis of Work* on Abolish Work, 1988
http://abolishwork.com/2014/12/01/the-crisis-of-work-andre-gorz/

Wolfe, Claire. *Dark Satanic Cubicles—It's time to smash the job culture!* on C4SS.org, 2005
https://c4ss.org/content/12839

Wilde, Oscar. *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* on Marxists.org, 1891
https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/
soul-man/

Morley, Christopher. *On Laziness* on essays.quotidania.org, 1920
http://essays.quotidiana.org/morley/laziness/

Lutz, Tom. *Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers and Bums*, 2006

Bonnano, Alfredo. *Let's Destroy Work, Let's Destroy the Economy* on The Anarchist Library,

Levison, Iain. *A Working Stiff Manifesto*, 2002

Paoli, Guillaume. *Demotivational Training*, 2013

Russell, Thaddeus. *A Renegade History of the United States*, 2010

Music

Johnny Paycheck—You Can Take This Job and Shove it
King Missile—Take Stuff From Work
The Dead Kennedy's—Take the Job and Shove it
Gentle Giant—Working All Day
Rush—Working Man
Lou Reed—Don't Talk to Me About Work
KRS One—They Are Taking Your Time
The Haverchucks—Work is for Suckers
They Might be Giant—Seven Days of the Week (I Never Go to Work)

Movies:

The Big Lebowski (1998)
Fight Club (1999)
Clerks (1994)
Chef (2014)
Office Space (1999)
Slacker (1991)
Ten Thousand Clowns (1965)

To be clear, the case against work is not one for a shorter workday, for better jobs, working conditions, or benefits, but rather for the enthusiastic retrieval of a kind of autonomy and energy that remains unthinkable as long as work endures. Violently and imperiously, work steals our opportunities for self-creation; it forecloses any possibility of Émile Armand's beautiful idea—"personal life as a work of art," whereby life is lived in favor of oneself, not as a funereal exercise in abstention.

From the
Introduction

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